

## **Committee:**

**Date: 30<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

Wards: All

## **Subject: Departmental Update**

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

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## **Recommendations:**

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

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## **1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1. The report provides members of the panel with information on key developments affecting the Children, Schools and Families Department, since the panel's last meeting and not covered elsewhere on the agenda. It focusses on those aspects of particular relevance to the department and those where the panel expressed an interest in receiving regular updates.
- 1.2. For this municipal year, the format of the report has changed slightly to include a paragraph about key issues in every service area within the directorate. This is to raise awareness and understanding of the full range of work in the directorate by ensuring even coverage across the services. Items specifically requested by scrutiny members will be covered under the service area to which they relate and are highlighted in the text as (*Scrutiny Request*).
- 1.3. This report will also provide members of the scrutiny panel an update on the Directorate's response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

## **2 DETAILS**

### **CHILDREN, SCHOOLS & FAMILIES**

- 2.1. Nobody could have foreseen the unprecedented social and economic changes we have witnessed in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic since the last scrutiny panel. This update therefore provides a sense of how services adapted to and met this challenge. I am pleased to report that the Children's Schools and Family Directorate has displayed exemplary leadership and resilience in these turbulent times.
- 2.2. In preparing this report, I am conscious that Ofsted is likely to be undertaking a social care inspection in Merton in the coming months. Although the inspectorate has not yet returned to full inspection under the ILACS framework (which is the inspection we are awaiting), we know that we are likely to be subject to a 'focussed visit'. This visit will consider the

range of services providing support to children in need of early help, open to Child in Need or Child Protection plans, as well as our children in care and those with care experience. It is likely to pay particular attention to the way we supported these children during the Covid pandemic, and how we adapted our services to meet their needs. After an initial focus on adapting our practices to Covid, we have resumed our general preparations for inspection over the last couple of months.

- 2.3. We are also due an inspection of our youth justice services between now and spring 2021, and a re-visit following our Written Statement of Action arising from the SEND inspection in 2019 may well follow shortly thereafter.
- 2.4. I would like to draw to the panel's attention this Council's response to unaccompanied asylum seeking children. We have offered our assistance to young people arriving in Kent, after an increase in demand there led KCC and the Home Office to seek help from other local authorities. In addition, the Home Office has placed a number of asylum seeking families at the Holiday Inn in Colliers Wood. Despite assurances that that children would not be housed there, we are now providing support to a number of families with children accommodated in the building.
- 2.5. Finally, staff across the CSF Directorate have responded strongly to the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on Merton's BAME communities, to the killing of George Floyd in the USA and to the subsequent Black Lives Matter demonstrations. Many teams in CSF, including the Joint Senior Leadership Team, have taken time to explore issues of race, power, inclusion in the workplace. We continue to work to provide services that are inclusive and meet the diverse needs of all Merton residents, and to develop anti-racist practices to support our staff in the workplace.

### **Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion Division**

#### **MASH & First Response**

- 2.6. The MASH and First Response Team lost one Team Manager who is taking a short career break. This post is currently being filled by an agency Team Manager.
- 2.7. A new MASH Team Manager started on 04/04/2020. She comes to us with considerable experience in managing MASH Teams and has been a Team Manager for 6 years.
- 2.8. The MASH and First Response Team currently has 9 agency SW's across the service and continues to try and recruit permanent staff. We have dedicated a meeting with our Assistant Director and HR colleagues to review our current offer and consider a more creative offer for social workers to First Response.
- 2.9. We have 3 ASYE Social Workers joining the service.
- 2.10. Although the number of referrals into MASH during this Covid period decreased we have had some very complex and high profile cases to manage. However, we have managed to keep caseloads to social workers

below 17 children. Throughout we have managed to maintain our service target of completing 91% of our assessments on time.

### Safeguarding and Care Planning

- 2.11. In July 2020, Joanne Forster returned from maternity leave to take up the permanent Head of Safeguarding and Care Planning role. Linda Goodhew who had been acting in an interim capacity stepped back into her substantive team manager's role. The service was very successfully held and supported across the 12 months whilst the permanent post holder was absent. The challenge of adapting very quickly to lockdown expectations and remote working was overcome promptly and the front line staff reported feeling supported, clear and safe.
- 2.12. There are currently 9 Vacancies in SACP for permanent social workers across the 5 safeguarding and care planning teams. Two ASYEs will come into the service in October, two Agency social workers have opted to go permanent and two external social workers have been offered permanent positions. Within the near future we will therefore fill 6 vacancies. This will leave only 3 vacancies. Despite the challenges of remote working during COVID, the recruitment of new staff has been successful.
- 2.13. In March 2020, the Children with Disabilities Team moved into the Safeguarding and Care Planning Service and is now under the line management of the Head of Safeguarding and Care Planning. The Team Manager is a locum manager and is covering the absence of the permanent team manager who is seconded into Team 1 in the safeguarding team. The Children with Disabilities Team has settled into the new service area well. They have experienced some disruption with staff leaving and have had new starters join during COVID. They are currently fully staffed with only one permanent vacancy covered by an agency social worker and one maternity leave absence covered with an agency worker.
- 2.14. The safeguarding service moved out of the critical operating model in July 2020. At this point (following a period where a very high number of visits were undertaken virtually) social workers started to go back to increased direct face to face visits with children and families where it is safe to do so. In July, figures show all 6 teams within safeguarding and care planning (including CWD) had at least 70% direct face to face contact with families as opposed to virtual contact. Three teams achieved over 80% direct contact with families and one team achieved over 90% direct contact. Social Workers are going back out into the community. This is an important aspect of relationship-based practice.
- 2.15. Throughout the COVID period, we have seen an increase in numbers of families in need of help and protection. Some of this is driven by new families open to the service, but some of it is caused by delays in the family courts which means that casework cannot be brought promptly to a conclusion. Numbers of Children in Need and Numbers of Child Protection Cases have risen in recent months since March 2020, as have numbers of children in Care Proceedings. This increase has led to an increase in

caseloads in the safeguarding service. Average caseloads at the time of writing are up to 16.8.

- 2.16. In August, the service was successful in a bid to pilot the Social Workers in Schools project in 6 Merton secondary schools (which were randomly selected by the pilot researchers). The Social Workers in Schools Team will sit within safeguarding and care planning and the pilot will involve embedding a social worker into the following schools: Melrose, Ursuline, Rutlish, Harris Merton, Harris Morden and Harris Wimbledon. The Team Manager is already identified and the social work team will be in place by the 18<sup>th</sup> September. The pilot is funded for the autumn and spring terms and will hopefully extend to the summer term, if funding is made available.

#### *Permanency, Looked After Children and Access to Resources Team*

- 2.17. The service is enjoying a period of staff stability with a stable, permanent, management group. This stability is reflected in performance with children being frequently visited (the average of in time visits from May – August was 93%, up from an average of 83% over the previous 8-months) and all children, who have not yet achieved their permanence plan, now receiving regular permanency planning meetings. As of 07/09/2020, the Children in Care team is fully staffed with permanent employees and there is only one agency staff member in the entire service.
- 2.18. The implementation of the fostering Mockingbird Family Model stalled during Covid-19 but has since been reignited and we are currently in the recruitment phase of the Hub Home Care. During the first quarter, there were 4 new foster households approved, 2 of which were connected carers. After receiving encouraging feedback we are drafting a revised proposal to transform School Caretaker Properties into suitable accommodation for our care experienced young people, in order to better meet their needs and make some savings on our placements budget.
- 2.19. Prior to lockdown on 05/03/2020, Merton's inaugural fostering conference was held – 'Developmental Trauma – An overview with children in care in mind'. The conference was very successful with an excellent turnout of foster carers. Since then, the service has successfully transitioned to using Zoom in delivering virtual training courses.
- 2.20. After a meeting in January, April's Corporate Parenting Board was cancelled due to Covid-19 but the September one is scheduled to proceed virtually on 17/09/2020 and a further meeting is scheduled for November. A multi-agency Children in Care steering group has been formed which will drive forward the Corporate Parenting Strategy's Action Plan.

#### *Quality Assurance & Practice Development*

- 2.21. Covid 19: since March 2020, there have been significant changes to the way in which the service operates. The service continues to support development and provide guidance and implementation of policy and practice such as the critical operating model, visits and virtual conferences. We currently remain with the majority of meetings held

virtually, although a small number are held face to face where required and based on risk. Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) continue to meet with young people and wherever possible, hold reviews face to face.

- 2.22. Audit programme: We refreshed the audit framework and embedded stronger collaborative audit systems. We continue to undertake monthly collaborative audits and these form part of the monthly reports to the newly established Learning and Improvement Board. Findings are communicated directly to the front-line via bulletins and monthly reports for managers. We have made significant progress to identify the strengths of practice, but also the areas we want to strengthen. The audit programme continues for all managers with a strong focus on collaborative and strengths-based approach. Findings from audits directly inform training delivery on focused areas. We continue to complete a number of thematic and deep dive audits in addition to the monthly audits.
- 2.23. Practice weeks: We successfully operated two practice weeks and a third is planned for October 2020. The implementation of practice weeks not only allows us to identify and celebrate strong practice, but also importantly allows education and social care leaders to observe practice from across the directorate and strengthen the development of strategy, policy and practice.
- 2.24. Initial Child Protection Conference (ICPC) timeliness remains a strength in Merton with 100% achievement. The number of children subject to child protection plans has increased within the last quarter potentially due to the implementation of the critical operating model during Covid. In the last 2 months, there has been an increase in new requests for very young children, pre-birth and large families. We moved from the position of 108 children subject to CPC, to 134 this month. We have one young person subject to CPC over 2 years, 5 young people at or around 15 months. For the young person over 2 years, the matter has been within proceedings and there remain some concerns since a supervision order was made by the court. Whilst QAPD are reviewing those CPP between 12 to 18 months alongside the safeguarding service, we are equally raising the issue where plans are not successfully and the recommendation for legal planning meetings.
- 2.25. The number of children and young people in our care generally remains stable. We have witnessed a recent increase in the number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children which was preceded by decline. We have commenced work to review those young people subject to section 20 accommodation and strengthen permanency and transition planning. IROs remain an active and independent advocate when reviewing and promoting the rights of young people. Overall, performance and timeliness remains very high within reviews and meetings, challenge has taken place to ensure the data performance actually reflects this.
- 2.26. Permanent staff: Since March 2020, we have recruited two permanent IROs replacing others who left the service. We have also recruited a permanent sign of safety practice lead who will support and strengthen practice across services. We continue to use an interim auditor, but it has

been a challenge to identify and recruit the right person on a permanent basis. The same applies for the QA fostering panel manager lead role.

- 2.27. Training and development: We have implemented a training programme, mapping alongside corporate services and embedded a Merton CPD platform. We have recently identified and commissioned a signs of safety consultant, training has been mapped in respect of systemic practice but also to fully embed the practice model. Currently under Covid 19, all training is provided on a virtual platform and we have circulated a high number of webinars, purchased membership of and rolled out access to 'Research in Practice' and supported staff members to increase CPD under social work England requirements.
- 2.28. As a service, we are under strength in terms of being able to support and resource development across children's social care as fully as we would want. We are seeking to recruit two QA auditors/practice managers to support and strengthen practice across services. In addition, we are seeking to recruit to the QA fostering panel manager post on a permanent basis. However, the service has operated a critical role in learning case reviews, partnership engagement and critical events such as DfE notifications and CDOP. With the proposed restructure, we are looking to strengthen services further and support development across the organisation.

#### Adolescent and Family Service

- 2.29. The Youth Justice Team continues to prepare for inspection. The inspectorate has announced that they will be undertaking shorter and virtually based inspections for 'small YOTs' between September 2020 and April 2021. Merton is on the list as a small team and is therefore anticipating an inspection in the next few months.
- 2.30. The Youth Justice Team's response to Covid has ensured that services have been maintained. The Pre-Court services are delivered virtually or at the Wimbledon Police station. Court hearings are primarily virtual but have occasionally required attendance at court and in the cells to assure the young person's wellbeing (staff have been provided with PPE for these visits). Community orders have been delivered by case practitioners and specialist staff over video calls. This has required some creative solutions to ensure the 2 to 3 weekly sessions are engaging. Some face-to-face sessions have been carried out where required and to manage risk. For young people in custody it has been a very isolating time and involved almost completely being confined to their rooms. They had increased access to phone calls and workers ensured they stayed in regular contact with young people. Video calls were more problematic but were eventually enabled by the custody service.
- 2.31. The Tackling Exploitation Team has ensured that they have continued to deliver the Child Sexual Exploitation and Child Criminal Exploitation meetings as per the MARVE protocol. The MARVE panel has continued to be held but virtually and only reviewing High risk cases for case discussion (panel members can still review and nominate those identified as 'Medium' risk for discussion). There has been a change in staffing of specialist workers with the Gangs worker moving from Transforming Families Team

to the Tackling Exploitation Team and second worker leaving in July. Two workers have now been appointed on a fixed term basis until the Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion re-organisation is complete.

- 2.32. The Head of Service, Tackling Exploitation manager and the Contextual Engagement Manager have been developing a suite of tools to support social work teams in assessing and responding to contextual harm. These will be piloted as part of the University of Bedfordshire Contextual Safeguarding Scale Up project. The protocol and strategy being developed will also support an alignment of operational and strategic oversight of contextual risks within wider statutory safeguarding processes.

*Knife crime update (Scrutiny focus)*

- 2.33. A number of young people were arrested for knife related offences during lockdown and as a result there was a rise in young people being remanded to custody during April and May 2020 with subsequent custodial sentence.
- 2.34. The Youth Justice Team has reviewed the offer for robust alternatives to custody, which was impacted by Covid restrictions and intensive orders being difficult with young people not having access to education or training. In August the team was able to provide an intensive offer for young people facing custody, allowing courts to be confident of the community offer.
- 2.35. Serious Youth Violence incidents have also increased over the summer, this resulted in tasking and intelligence meetings being held between the Police Integrated Offender Management teams, Tackling Exploitation Team, Youth Justice, Youth Service and Education Inclusion to understand the circumstances surrounding the increase and those implicated or requiring an enhanced response. There is an agreement to meet monthly to continue to review the incidents and both the enforcement and safeguarding responses.

14+ and Care Leavers Service

- 2.36. As a number of social workers left the service between December and March, the Improvement Plan's aim of having more Personal Advisors and fewer Social Workers in the team has started to be delivered within the existing staff establishment. However, the team then felt the impact of Covid lockdown and the reduced team of social workers was further impacted by staff vulnerabilities resulting in a smaller team covering duty tasks. The service was still able to be delivered under critical arrangements, with care experienced young people having only virtual visits unless absolutely necessary and those in care having less frequent visits unless deemed high risk. Some young people engaged very positively with the virtual calls, with workers reporting that this seemed to be due to the lack of pressure of needing a visit. Some young people struggled with the isolation and lack of contact, requiring additional emotional support.
- 2.37. Since the last reporting period, the team experienced a drop in newly arrived unaccompanied asylum seeking children from the Pan-London

rota. After the first quarter dip there has been a recent increase in referrals due to a request from Kent County Council and the Home Office to support an influx of new arrivals. The Pan-London rota continues to allocate transfers and the Home Office has began using the Colliers Wood Holiday Inn for asylum seeking families. This has resulted in three age disputed young people being referred to Merton and requiring age assessments, which carry a high risk of judicial challenge. The Home Office has sought further support for Kent County Council and Merton council recently accepted two more children for transfer. Despite the recent increase, we currently accommodate fewer UASC children than the 37-38 that represent 0.08% of our child population (which is the number the administration has previously agreed to accommodate).

- 2.38. The 14+ Team has also experienced further staffing changes with a long established manager leaving the service at the end of August. The post is being covered by an agency manager, who previously worked in Merton, until the Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion re-organisation is complete

### **Education Division**

#### **School Improvement**

- 2.39. Since lockdown, the work of Merton School Improvement has altered in some significant ways.
- 2.40. At the beginning of lockdown, the schools' IT team supported schools to ensure they could access their Management Information Systems remotely, as many staff were working remotely at that time: since then, officers have themselves been supporting schools remotely with these systems. The team supported schools to develop their remote online learning offer for pupils, by providing guidance about how this can be delivered safely; ensuring schools are linked in to the national EdTech Demonstrator programme; providing support for the government's digital devices programme; and linking schools to local provision of devices for disadvantaged pupils. The team also led on the development of a Remote Learning Strategy for the Council's schools.
- 2.41. The Virtual School has continued to ensure that Personal Education Plan (PEP) planning meetings for our looked after children take place, albeit remotely, and has liaised closely with colleagues in social care in Merton and other local authorities where our children care are placed, to ensure that that children were in school during the period before 1<sup>st</sup> June, when schools were only open for vulnerable children, and the children of key workers. Where these children were not able to attend school, the PEPs ensured that children continued to engage with education. The Virtual School has commissioned a new system for recording the attendance at school of our children in care. This started smoothly in April; there will also be a new PEP recording system starting this term.
- 2.42. Merton Education Partners (MEPs) in the School Improvement Team have been critical in maintaining contact with schools over the past few months. In the early days of lockdown they contacted schools on a daily basis to



check in with headteachers to ensure there was a good understanding of the issues facing schools and to provide the headteachers with support. These calls continued, at least on a weekly basis, with most schools throughout the summer term as well. MEPs also sought assurance from schools that appropriate provision was in place for vulnerable pupils, and helped schools to interpret and operationalise national guidance. Whilst aspects of the Professional Development programme for teachers and leaders in schools could not continue, advisors maintained some meetings, holding them remotely using narrated Powerpoints, and then using the Zoom platform. Headteachers have received a daily email, summarising government guidance and ensuring that Council communication within them was streamlined.

- 2.43. A Black Lives Matter and Equalities steering group was established in July, which is developing strategy to support schools to address this agenda going forward.
- 2.44. Ofsted ceased inspection of schools when lockdown began, and therefore there have been no inspections of Merton schools since then. Since the last departmental update to Scrutiny, and just before lockdown, Haslemere and SS Peter and Paul primary schools were inspected: both retain their good judgements in Section 8 ('short') inspections, but SS Peter and Paul's letter indicated they would have a full section 5 ('full') inspection after a year to ensure that areas of concern seen in the short inspection were scrutinised in greater depth. Ofsted will begin visiting schools again from the end of September, but these visits will not constitute inspections. Ofsted's current plans are that inspection will resume in January 2021. Merton schools are being supported by the School Improvement Team to prepare for the visits this term, and for the resumption of inspection from January.

#### Education Inclusion

- 2.45. The My Futures team has continued to support vulnerable young people and those who are not in education training or employment under lockdown. The staff have been contacting young people over the phone and counselling sessions have been delivered on line. The team delivered an on line careers week with short videos by different professionals posted out to young people each day. They have also worked with the Youth Service on "taking the temperature" to hear from young people how Covid has affected them, so that we can tailor our support to their needs. Significant numbers of young people with mental health issues coped well in lockdown but have found the unlocking very challenging. The Job market is also challenging but the employability team have continued to be able to place young people into opportunities and have recently completed a very prestigious cross-borough project with Quiet Storm advertising agency.
- 2.46. The Merton information and Advice Service has continued to support parents of children with special educational needs and receive positive feedback. Their workload has increased under lockdown with many very concerned parents coming to the service for support. A review of these

calls suggests that this was in part personal support that the adults needed as well as advice around their child's special needs. The service is implementing a new database which will allow it to record and report more accurately moving forward.

- 2.47. Merton's participation service moved online. Initially the youth parliament met online and the working group continued with themes such as climate change. The youth parliament members have also supported the online recruitment of a new worker. The young inspectors have been very busy on a wider range of projects with the social care quality assurance team and public health. Under lockdown the Participation manager led a newly formed partnership detached engagement service. This service had staff from Catch 22, the youth service and My Futures and were out across Merton throughout lockdown to engage and support any young people. This was extremely successful with high compliance to the lockdown rules by young people and positive feedback from the community. Areas of concern were targeted throughout and with the easing of lockdown. The team found less compliance further west in the borough and most compliance in Mitcham. The site of most concern in this period was Wimbledon Common.
- 2.48. The Education Welfare Service continues to support core safeguarding and licencing functions under lockdown and has been supporting schools with the return of children in the autumn term. Under lockdown vulnerable children and those of key workers could attend and the team ran a Children Missing Education process for all children open to social care. These meetings reviewed cases with social care managers to promote access to education. Take up of the offer of education increased significantly as a result of this process. There has been a steady rise in parents choosing Elective Home Education for their children over the summer. This is a trend that has been reported nationally. Schools have been supported with their new attendance requirements and processes.
- 2.49. The Behaviour Support Service continued to support vulnerable children in school during lockdown. The team also ran a range of virtual training and mentoring sessions and a virtual transition event linking every secondary school with feeder primaries to share information to successfully support transition of children new to year 7. This process was well received by schools. The team also works with CAMHS to support school mental health leads. Sessions were run on line to support schools to share ideas about support for children returning in September.
- 2.50. The Speech and Language Service had to move their support for children online under lockdown. The therapists developed new packages of support and discussed these with parents online. Statutory assessments have continued. The whole team successfully recruited new staff under lockdown and will now have the additional capacity to support children with dyslexia in the autumn term.
- 2.51. The Youth Service had to close its doors to children during lockdown so the staff stayed in touch with families over the phone. The adventure playground staff and volunteers worked with the Salvation Army to deliver learning resources and food across the Eastfields area. Duke of Edinburgh

staff kept in touch with young people encouraging them to take up new activities at home. The Youth Service led on “Taking the Temperature”, listening to the issues young people face. Particular support was given in Pollards Hill and Phipps Bridge after the murder of George Floyd that shocked staff and young people alike. The service opened again for small bubbles of young people across the summer, once the revised government guidance permitted these activities. Take-up was slow, with many parents not wanting to return their children until children went back to school. The rules of safe opening significantly reduce the numbers of young people able to participate at one time and decreased their regularity of access to services.

#### *Early Years, Family Wellbeing and Early Help*

- 2.52. The new, all-age (0-25) Family Wellbeing Service went live on 3<sup>rd</sup> February, and moved to a Covid 19 delivery model in March. Practitioners are delivering a range of remote family support and parenting services to families during this time. Since April, 244 families have been supported
- 2.53. Our new early help coordinators have provided remote information and sign-posting about local services. Since July they have supported 80 professionals and families.

#### *Early Years Provision – Funded Places Scheme (scrutiny request)*

- 2.54. During the pandemic, Merton continued to fund all providers who were expecting to deliver 2, 3 and 4 year old funded places and the overall supply of places appeared to meet parental demand. By September all funded education providers were open and our provider support team have given significant guidance, advice and support to all early years and childcare settings.
- 2.55. The service delivered its final accredited SEND programme for practitioners, and 20 Merton settings’ practitioners across the spring and summer terms. For the autumn term we have moved our training online, and early indications suggest that take-up is high

#### *Children’s Centres*

- 2.56. Merton’s network of Children’s Centres provided remote support to families, as well as continuing to offer some community spaces to our partner health services. This autumn term sees the phased reintroduction of our garden sessions, for up to 6 people, in our centres located in our areas of deprivation. We launched our online Baby Programme for families with babies aged 1 month to 7 months, and the take up has been higher than expected. 30 remote programmes (each of 5 sessions) have been set up with over 80 attendees.

#### *Support for families with a child aged under 5 with SEND*

- 2.57. For families in this cohort, staff continued to offer services remotely, and in time for the summer staff began home visiting, offering garden sessions or a one to one session in our Children’s Centres. Take up of our Portage and SEND Family Support has been high, with all families engaging in our offer, and over 95% taking up face-to-face services once reintroduced.

*Direct services childcare*

- 2.58. Our in-house nursery and early years preschools have remained open through the lock-down and have provided places for key workers and vulnerable children, expanding their places in line with government guidance. Take up has been very high with staff offering remote learning at the beginning of lockdown. Brightwell specialist out of school provision remained open, providing ongoing services both during the school term and the holidays for children with severe and complex special educational needs. Over 30 children and young people participated in the summer holiday offer.

*Special Educational Needs Service and EHCPs (scrutiny request)*

- 2.59. The Special Educational Needs and Disabilities integrated service has continued to see increased demand for statutory assessments. Currently, we have 2162 Education, Health and Care plans and are undertaking 227 new Education, Health and Care Needs Assessments.
- 2.60. There has been a significant decrease in our success at meeting the 20-week timescale during COVID. This has been for a number of reasons exacerbated by the pandemic including: late professional advice delaying planning meetings and in a small number of cases parents not engaging with planning meetings
- 2.61. On 1 May 2020 some aspects of the law on education, health and care (EHC) needs assessments and plans changed temporarily to give local authorities, health commissioning bodies, education settings and other bodies who contribute to these processes more flexibility in responding to the demands placed on them by coronavirus (COVID-19). The temporary changes to the law cease on 25th September 2020 and therefore we would hope to see an improvement in compliance with the statutory timescales. All cases since the 1st May and 25th September will have the Coronavirus exception applied and this is reported to the DfE
- 2.62. The service re-organisation which was due to be completed in March 2020 was delayed due to COVID however the recruitment has now taken place and new staff are commencing in October 2020. This will add increased management capacity to better manage and increase the quality of the work undertaken by the SEN Team. There will be a particular focus on annual review processes.
- 2.63. The HoS and the CCG have been working with partner agencies to pilot templates for professional advice. This will streamline the way in which partner agencies provide their advice. The CCG has funded training to health professionals on writing professional advice, this training commences in October 2020. The Council for Disabled Children is supporting the LA to provide training to children's social care on Social Care professional advice and supporting the review of the current templates and process.
- 2.64. Since the last scrutiny meeting, we have met with the DfE and NHS England who reviewed our progress on the Written Statement of Action - Action Plan. The feedback from this meeting was positive and it was felt

that the LA and the CCG are making good progress towards achieving the actions outlined in the plan.

- 2.65. The SEN case management system is being implemented and the team is working on data migration and implementation. The system is due to go live in January 2021.

*Contracts and School Organisation*

- 2.66. Covid-19 has had a significant impact on this service in relation to determining eligibility for free school meals, managing the primary school meals services contract, SEND home to school transport commissioning, and the schools central cleaning contract.
- 2.67. **School admissions:** Despite partial school closures, the school admissions continued with national primary school offer day operating as normal on 16 April 2020 and Merton's nursery offer day taking place on 15 May 2020 as planned. Appeals were successfully undertaken through conference calls, which were allowed under amended government guidance. No appeals were upheld.
- 2.68. In-year Admissions reduced significantly during the lockdown period, but there has been significant movement in late August and into September. In year applications for September 2020 are predicted to equal volumes received in September 2019.
- 2.69. With the downturn in the economy and the benefits of the national voucher scheme to provide supermarket vouchers for children not attending school, the School Admissions Team received and checked 2496 free school meal applications between March and mid September. Of these, 786 (31.5%) were found to be eligible
- 2.70. **Harris Academy Wimbledon:** An update on this project is provided elsewhere to this committee. At the time of writing the school is expected to be completed to move into its permanent home in South Wimbledon straight after the October half term, following Covid related construction delays. The school is again fully subscribed this year.
- 2.71. **Additional SEND places:** The final phase of the expansion of Cricket Green School was completed in March and sadly the planned official opening event in late March needed to be cancelled due to the lockdown. Nevertheless the school is excited to be providing for the additional numbers and excellent improved facilities.
- 2.72. A statutory consultation for the expansion of Melrose School was completed over the summer and the school is now an all-through school. A primary age class has opened for a temporary period in part of Worsfold House (empty building adjacent to Melrose School) prior to completion of the permanent building, which is out to procurement and due to be considered by planning committee next month. For the first time the council is therefore now providing local specialist places for primary age children with Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs.
- 2.73. **Four Schools PFI Contract:** Officers continue to work with a specialist to hold the PFI contractor to account. This is leading to a serious of challenges and withholding of monies, for which officers are also working

closely with legal colleagues, governed by a steering group attended by the Directors of CSF and Corporate Services. A recent success has been to remove the Rutlish School playing fields from the contract without cost to the council, thus allowing the school the flexibility to get the fields back to the right standard and manage them to facilitate the sporting ethos of the school.

- 2.74. **SEND Home to School transport commissioning:** this service has been managed with pupil journeys reducing to 10% of previous levels in late March, growth during the summer term and back up to near normal for September. Appropriate procedures have needed to be implemented following changing government guidance and risk assessment.
- 2.75. The service has also worked with Environment and Regeneration colleagues and schools in working with TfL to support public transportation issues in returning to school in September. This has included lobbying for additional buses and supporting the case against the removal of universal free bus travel across London for children under 18.
- 2.76. **School meals service:** This has needed to be adapted to provide a small offering to schools to match small, but slowly growing pupil numbers from 23 March, to more normal numbers in September. However, the service has needed to be adapted significantly due to the need for schools to remain in bubbles and therefore not meet at close distance in the dining hall.

#### Performance, Policy and Partnerships

- 2.77. The Performance, Policy and Partnerships team have been working remotely since lockdown.
- 2.78. The performance team has been at full capacity since February – with the arrival of a new Team Manager. The team has introduced improved operational reporting – including monitoring the use of virtual visits across the service during lockdown.
- 2.79. In addition, the team has submitted the two main statutory social care returns. I am pleased to report that both submissions were sent in on time. During lockdown, the team has had to respond to increased demand for performance information from the DfE. We have successfully administered three additional regular data requests on behalf of the authority.
- 2.80. The Policy and Partnership Team has been busy supporting the Children's Trust Board which has met twice in lockdown and managed to take forward its important business.
- 2.81. The Policy and Partnership Team has also overseen a successful re-organisation of the Merton Safeguarding Partnership (MSCP) sub-group structure. The new structure allows the MSCP to better focus on its business priorities, as well as discharge its statutory functions relating to training, oversight of multi-agency learning and the delivery of the training programme more efficiently.

#### Joint Commissioning and Partnerships

- 2.82. The Children's Commissioning Team restructured in April, following retirement of the long-standing Head of Service. The team is now managed by a Consultant in Public Health Consultant and a Senior commissioning manager post has been created. An integrated CYP Commissioning group meets monthly, bringing together directors in CSF, public health and SWL CCG and a set of joint priorities for next six months has been agreed.
- 2.83. The service continues to prioritise the integration of Children, Schools and Families' commissioning with Public Health and the CCG. This is currently particularly focussed on development and recovery of services in response to COVID 19, including community health services for children: health visiting, school nursing and therapies, and development of future commissioning arrangements. The team has worked with our priority services Mencap, Carers Support Merton and Jigsaw bereavement and counselling, to ensure delivery of services, including online support, during the COVID pandemic.
- 2.84. The mental health and emotional wellbeing of our children and young people continues to be a priority with the ongoing development of school trailblazers, development of on-line services, and development of the 'i-thrive' model for mental health and wellbeing. The mobilisation of the Risk and Resilience Service is now complete and the service, delivered by Catch 22, spans a range of areas, including responses to substance misuse, smoking cessation, return home interviews for children missing from home, detached youth work and work round Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE).

### **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**

**12 BACKGROUND PAPERS**

12.1. None