

Committee: Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Date: 04 November 2020

Wards: All

Subject: Departmental Update

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

Lead member: Councillor Eleanor Stringer, Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Education.

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

Recommendations:

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

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 includes 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. It is only a short time since the last CYP Scrutiny on 30 September and therefore this Departmental Update has been kept fairly brief to focus only on changes between then and now.
- 2.2. The previous report noted that "Ofsted is likely to be undertaking a social care inspection in Merton in the coming month". In fact, by the time of the last scrutiny meeting an 'assurance visit' had already been announced. The visit officially ran from 6 to 8 October, but as the Annex A information was submitted as required on Friday 25 and Monday 28 September, inspection activity effectively lasted for two full weeks. These 'assurance

visits' have been developed by Ofsted as a way to evaluate a local authority's practice under Covid arrangements, with a focus on children's social care as well as support for schools and school attendance. Under these arrangements the outcome of the visit is a narrative outcome letter, rather than a headline judgement with accompanying report.

- 2.3. Until the outcome letter is published, the overall inspection findings remain confidential, but they were communicated privately to the Chief Executive, Cabinet Member and Directorate Management Team on the afternoon of 8 October and were very positive. In particular, the feedback noted that senior managers had already identified the areas of practice that needed further work and that we have plans in place to do this.
- 2.4. The draft outcome letter from the assurance visit was received by the Director of Children, Schools and Families for factual accuracy checks on Friday 23 October and the final outcome letter will be published on 20 November.
- 2.5. This Departmental Update report is the last I will submit during my tenure as Merton's Director of Children, Schools and Families. I will be leaving Merton in early December to take up the DCS role in another local authority. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the terrific team in Children, Schools and Families that I have had the privilege to lead, in particular the Senior Leadership Team and my two Assistant Directors, Jane McSherry and El Mayhew. I would also like to thank the Cabinet Members I have had the pleasure to serve: Formerly Councillor Cooper-Marbiah and Councillor Braund, and more recently Councillor Stringer, for their helpful balance of support and challenge. Finally, I extend my thanks to the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel, and all its members over the years of my tenure. I have experienced diligent and thorough scrutiny from this panel, always undertaken in a spirit of appreciation and support.

Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion Division

MASH & First Response

- 2.6. In the last report, MASH had been able to maintain the service target of completing 91% of assessments on time. We are now reporting a decrease in our performance with regards to our assessment timeliness (now reported at 90% and below target). This is a result of changes to the way in which this indicator is reported. Previously, we would only count assessments open to MASH/First Response. We are now including assessments that are open to other services. This has enabled us to put in place tighter scrutiny, and we are expecting this figure to increase in the next reporting period.

Safeguarding and Care Planning

- 2.7. In September 2020, Children's Services received notice of an 'assurance visit' from Ofsted planned for the 6th, 7th and 8th October. The Safeguarding and Care Planning Service and Children with Disabilities Team experienced a high level of scrutiny during this process and received positive feedback. The service was focussed on preparing for the

visit and making sure Ofsted were provided with all of the information they needed prior to arriving. The inspectors spoke to 12 staff members from Safeguarding and Care Planning and Children with Disabilities over the 3 days.

- 2.8. Two Newly Qualified social workers on the ASYE programme arrived into the service in October, two Agency social workers opted to go permanent and we have one external social worker who will be joining Merton permanently in November. Despite the challenges of remote working during COVID, the recruitment of new staff has been relatively successful. We currently have three teams running with vacant posts, 4 vacancies in total and this is putting pressure on the existing staff group in terms of caseload volume. There have been challenges over the last month to find suitable agency cover for these vacant positions.
- 2.9. Throughout the COVID period, we have seen an increase in numbers of families in need of help and protection. 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. In September the numbers of children in need and child protection cases stopped increasing and we are hopeful that the upward trend will stabilise.
- 2.10. The Social Workers in Schools Team is now fully staffed and SWs are assigned to the following secondary schools:
- Rutlish, Melrose, Ursuline, Harris Wimbledon, Harris Morden and Harris Merton.

Permanency, Looked After Children and Access to Resources Team

- 2.11. This improved stability in this team reported at the last meeting continue to be reflected in performance, with children being frequently visited. Since May we have consistently been over 90% of visits in time, up from an average of 83% over the previous 8-months. All children who have not yet achieved their permanence plan are now receiving regular permanency planning meetings.
- 2.12. During Ofsted's recent visit, they provided verbal feedback on the improvements around permanency planning. They recommended that we focus on our life story work practice, an area which we had already identified as needing strengthening.
- 2.13. During the second quarter, there were 5 new, foster households approved, 1 of which was a connected carer. There was also one supported lodgings approved.
- 2.14. The first virtual Corporate Parenting Board was held in September following the cancellation of an earlier board due to Covid-19. The virtual meeting took place successfully and we were able to engage young people in the discussion. A further meeting is scheduled for November.

Quality Assurance & Practice Development

- 2.15. Covid 19: since March 2020, QAPD continues to support and provide advice and guidance for practitioners. As per the agreed operating model, the majority of IRO visits and virtual conferences/meetings continue to take place virtually. A small number are held face to face where required and based on risk. IROs continue to meet with young people and where possible, hold reviews face to face outside of the office where the young person is fully engaged in the process and their voice leads the plans we have.
- 2.16. Ofsted October 2020 visit: Ofsted reviewed aspects of the QAPD team. Initial feedback suggests that there was confidence in the quality assurance systems we have in place, including moderation and increased presence of the IRO within the child's journey. The permanence lead confirmed the achievements in progressing plans, also the areas we want to strengthen further for permanency for our children.
- 2.17. We continue to focus on areas to develop including strengthening advocacy, how we share outcomes of reviews with children via letter in place of minutes, and the use of formal letters of introduction for the young person when IROs are allocated. Plans to address these issues are already in place. In addition, permanency planning alongside life story work was discussed and we identified strategies to strengthen these areas in collaboration with other service areas and social workers.
- 2.18. Audit programme: We continue to undertake monthly collaborative audits and these form part of the monthly reports to the Learning and Improvement Board, and inform staff learning. We have made significant progress in identifying the strengths of practice and the areas we want to strengthen. The monthly audit programme continues for all managers with a strong focus on a collaborative and strengths-based approach. The use of monthly moderation and dip sample of audits by Heads of Service continues as this informs training delivery on focused areas. We have submitted an audit plan to the Improvement Board for 2020-21 to complete several thematic and deep dive audits.
- 2.19. Practice weeks: The planned practice week in October was rescheduled for November because of the Ofsted assurance visit. Practice weeks enable us to identify strong practice and allows leaders from across education and social care to observe practice across the directorate and strengthen the development of strategy, policy and practice.
- 2.20. September 2020 performance data: Initial Child Protection Conference (ICPC) timeliness remains a strength in Merton with 100% achievement. The number of children subject to child protection plans (CPP) has increased due to increased requests for ICPC regarding very young children, pre-birth and large families. We are also progressing those children where a transfer to another Local Authority needs to take place following the update within Covid 19 operating model guidance last month. At the end of September, 133 children remain subject to CPP.
- 2.21. Children and young people looked after_has slightly increased this month alongside unaccompanied asylum seeking children. All reviews held in

September were within timescales. We continue to review those young people subject to section 20 accommodation and strengthen permanency and transition planning. However, one challenge over the last 6 months was the availability of courts to hear and list final matters for final orders made. This was escalated via our legal teams to Cafcass and the judiciary.

- 2.22. Training and development, we have implemented a virtual training programme, mapped into a career pathway. We now use the corporate training platform. This enables us to better capture attendance data and post-course evaluations and obtain feedback on impact to practice 3 months after training attended.
- 2.23. We have commissioned a comprehensive Signs of Safety training programme and sponsored a high number of staff members to attend the accredited foundation year of systemic practice.
- 2.24. As a service, we are currently under strength in terms of being able to support and resource development across children's social care more fully as we would want. We are seeking to recruit permanent staff members to support and strengthen practice across services.
- 2.25. A permanent Signs of Safety practice lead commenced in post in September 2020. We continue to use an interim auditor and a QA Permanence Lead manager, but it has been a challenge to identify and recruit the right person on a permanent basis. When the Fostering Independent Reviewing officer left the organisation last month, we identified an experienced and qualified interim professional to take on the role. Subject to the proposed re-organisation consultation taking place, we plan to recruit to vacant posts with permanent staff.

Adolescent and Family Service

- 2.26. **Youth Justice Team** has submitted the Youth Justice Board required Recovery Plan, which outlines the learning from 'lockdown' and the anticipated levels of delivery against each Covid level. This was sent before the Government's announcement in October of the Tiers but remains broadly in line. Staff continue to deliver virtual visits but have started to hold sessions within the Annex when virtual engagement is difficult.
- 2.27. **Tackling Exploitation Team** have had two staff start at the end of September and they have been completing their induction and specialist training to support delivery of Contextual Safeguarding.
- 2.28. **Knife Crime update (scrutiny request)** - the Safer Merton Violence Reduction Plan includes actions for Children's Social Care aligned against contextual safeguarding delivery. Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion CSMT have signed off the Contextual Harm Protocol with accompanying practice guidance and tools to enhance the identification, assessment and planning against contextual harm, including victims of knife crime.
- 2.29. **The 14+ Service** has started to deliver visits to care leavers in line with the new operating model developed by CSMT. The visits to care leavers had

primarily been delivered virtually. If further restrictions or 'lockdown' take place, then visits would return to virtual unless for highly vulnerable young people. This will ensure that young people who have been asking for visits can receive these while we have the capacity and scope to deliver these.

Education Division

School Improvement

- 2.30. The Virtual School's support for Merton's children in care, and care experienced young people, has focused on their return to education in September. Officers have a good understanding of their needs, drawing on knowledge of what was happening for them prior to lockdown, during lockdown, and how the September return has gone for them. The overall attendance for statutory age pupils in the Virtual School currently stands at 95.5%, which is above the current national averages for all pupils in both the primary (92%) and secondary phase (87%). Officers in the Virtual School were also integrally involved with Ofsted assurance visit in early October, and were able to present evidence to the inspectors of the oversight they had of children and young people's education over the past months.
- 2.31. Officers in the school improvement team have continued to support schools, both in their planning for, and response to, Covid. The numbers of positive Covid cases in schools has recently increased, and headteachers are putting into action their risk assessments to keep their communities as safe as possible, as well as welcoming all children back to school. Pupil attendance has been good across both primary and secondary phases (above the national average since the beginning of term), and schools have been putting in place their 'recovery' curricula, and preparing their contingency plans for remote learning to support pupils that need to self-isolate as a result of Covid. Merton Education Partners have focused in particular on how schools are implementing these actions, which differ from 'normal' school activity. In addition, they have been supporting schools to be ready for the planned resumption of regular Ofsted inspection from January 2021, and focusing on 'normal' school improvement priorities. The Merton CPD programme continues for schools, with focuses on priorities associated with Covid (for example, developing the remote learning offer for pupils) and, again, more 'normal' priorities including leadership development. Briefings were offered to all Merton schools about the Ofsted process for the visits they are making to schools this term, and what schools should expect.

Scrutiny Request (October 2020): The council's activity to support schools in their response to the 'Black Lives Matter' movement

- 2.32. As was reported in the last Departmental Update, the 'Black Lives Matter and Equalities Forum' was established last term. It comprises representatives from across Merton schools, and has now met twice. The forum has scrutinised performance and outcome data for the different ethnic groups represented in Merton schools, and identified key themes to address from this data, and from an understanding of what research tells

us. These themes are addressed in a new strategy to guide anti-racism work across schools in Merton. This strategy is currently being consulted on with all schools. Once finalised, the following will be offered to Merton schools:

- Training for senior leaders – including a session from ‘Equaliteach; a year-long programme from ‘Integrity Coaching’; and sessions on decolonising the curriculum from ‘The Black Curriculum’
- Governors’ training
- Workshops for teachers
- Conference for Merton secondary pupils
- Conference for Merton school staff
- Ambassador’s Programme (for secondary age young people)

2.33. Woven into the activity of the Forum, which will oversee the Strategy, will be listening to young people from black and minority ethnic communities in Merton.

Education Inclusion

2.34. The My Futures team has continued to support vulnerable young people and those who are not in education training or employment back into college and work post lockdown. College applications have gone well and employers are still supporting young people to access opportunities. They are working closely with Sutton LA and South Thames College to prevent young people from falling out of college. The team have been active on social media promoting people who have inspired them as part of Black History Month.

2.35. The Merton information and Advice Service has continued to support parents of children with special educational needs and receive positive feedback. Their workload has continued to increase as more children have gone back to school. They are planning outreach sessions to make sure that a diversity of parents are accessing the service.

2.36. Merton's participation service has been recruiting young people for the children in care council and care experience forum. In addition, the current young inspectors are moving over to focus on public health work and we will be recruiting four more with two posts ring-fenced for care experienced young people.

2.37. The Education Welfare Service continues to support core safeguarding and licencing functions and has been supporting schools with the return of children in the autumn term. Officers have been supporting schools to ensure children are back in school. There has been a delayed rise in children moving abroad or out of London which has meant a significant rise in children missing education referrals to be followed up. There has been a rapid rise in parents choosing Elective Home Education for their children since the summer. This is a trend that has been reported nationally. The rise is higher in primary aged children and includes a

significant group of formerly privately educated children. Schools have been supported with their new attendance requirements and processes.

- 2.38. The Behaviour Support Service continued to support vulnerable children in schools. The team is running the DfE-supported training for return to school with advice and support on children's mental health. The team is running training and supporting individual cases to help them manage in school. This is being undertaken with Covid risk assessment.
- 2.39. The Language and Learning Service has moved back to providing in-school Speech and Language therapy and learning assessments within a Covid Risk assessment. A significant number of dyslexia assessments are now being undertaken with the additional support in the team.
- 2.40. The Youth Service has reopened and delivers in bubbles of 15 children. Initially numbers were low but these have picked up strongly. However, the total numbers attending sessions will be lower than in previous years due to the limitation of group size. Duke of Edinburgh award has restarted and a total of 50 girls from Ricards Lodge and the Ursuline undertook their bronze activity walking some of the capital ring path and across Wimbledon Common, Richmond Park and through Kingston to Nonesuch. This was very successful and took significant support from parents and volunteers.

Early Years, Family Wellbeing and Early Help

Early Years Provision – Funded Places Scheme (scrutiny request)

- 2.41. 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. Since September funded education providers continue to provide childcare and early learning to families and our provider support team have given significant guidance, advice and support to all early years and childcare settings. Providers have continued to receive funding in accordance with central government guidance, which has aimed to secure certainty for both the summer and autumn terms.
- 2.42. In September, the service carried out a survey to establish the key presenting issues in light of Covid 19, across the childminding, private and voluntary sector with results showing that whilst settings are continuing to deliver services, they are concerned about long term sustainability and many are experiencing a drop in demand. Further monitoring into the new year will continue
- 2.43. Support for the early years' sector has increased, with a high volume of enquiries and ongoing communications and distribution of important information. For the autumn term we have moved our training and meetings for managers online with high take up, particularly for our manager support group

Children's Centres

- 2.44. We launched our online Baby Programme for families with babies aged 1 month to 7 months, and our online Toddler programme. The take up for

the baby programme has been higher than expected, with further programmes scheduled to meet demand.

Support for families with a child aged under 5 with SEND

2.45. No change since last report.

Direct services childcare

2.46. No change since last report.

Family Wellbeing Service

2.47. Staff across the service are now working directly with families face to face, as well as remotely. The Bond Road Centre, is open to families accessing the Family Time services (supervised contact) and will be open to staff to use as an office base in November, after a period of closure for refurbishment and improvements.

2.48. Our new Early Help Co-ordinators have provided remote information and sign-posting about local services, and during October have moved to a new offer of direct work in some Children's Centres supporting professionals and families in navigating early help pathways of support.

Early Help

2.49. Work continues to take place, with multi agency partners to produce our refreshed early help strategy and suite of support tools and best practice guidance. Community and family engagement activity will take place in the new year, with the aim of producing our new strategy and associated documents in March/ April 2021.

Special Educational Needs Service and EHCPs (scrutiny request)

2.50. The Special Educational Needs and Disabilities integrated service has continued to see increased demand for statutory assessments. Currently, we have 2188 Education, Health and Care plans and are undertaking 180 new Education, Health and Care Needs Assessments.

2.51. 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.

2.52. 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.

2.53. 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.

- 2.54. 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. CCG training has commenced for Health Professionals. In addition, the Council for Disabled Children and the LA have agreed the training program for children's social care and the dates will be confirmed in the coming weeks. The National Development Team for Inclusion has also set the dates that they will be delivering training to children and adults social care and the special educational needs teams on Transitions and Preparation for Adulthood.
- 2.55. 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 and the service is still on track to meet this deadline. Following the implementation of the SEN Case Management system phase 2 will be the development of the EHCP Portal which is an add on program to the Case Management system which will allow online co-development of Education Health and Care Plans by SEN staff, parents, young people and professionals.

Contracts and School Organisation

- 2.56. **School admissions and school meals:** In-year Admissions were at normal levels in September, which is always a very busy period. With lower numbers starting from March to July, there is a net loss of pupils during the Covid period.
- 2.57. The increase in children eligible for free school meals is a significant issue, and the team has ensured applications for eligibility are processed as quickly as possible. 275 additional children were assessed as eligible in September and through to the first half of October. We expect Autumn school census figures to confirm an overall significant increase in children in Merton schools eligible for free school meals since the start of the Covid period.
- 2.58. For children not attending school due to Covid/self-isolating we have agreed a general approach for schools to organise supermarket vouchers while publicising Merton's COVID-19 Community Response Hub. The Hub works with local charities such as Dons Local Action Group for families that need support, such as help with shopping and basic supplies.
- 2.59. **Harris Academy Wimbledon:** Since last month's update this project has met timescale and it is fully expected that children will start attending their permanent school in South Wimbledon during the week after the October half term.
- 2.60. **Four Schools PFI Contract:** Through September and October officers have continued to work with a specialist to hold the PFI contractor to account, and have held meetings with Directors of the PFI company to seek change to the benefit of the schools.

- 2.61. **SEND Home to School transport commissioning:** This service has been extremely busy during September and October, with near normal travel levels again and appropriate procedures needing to be followed during this Covid period

SEND provision (scrutiny request)

- 2.62. The increase in children with EHCPs requiring specialist provision has led to an expansion programme to offset some of the growth in independent school placements. The table below summarises progress to date on planned projects and those completed within the last year:

School and places	Project	Expected completion
Stanford Primary School ASD base - 24 places	ASD unit to meet need through adaptation of existing premises.	Completed early 2020
Cricket Green School	Expansion by 56 places	Completed spring 2020
Melrose School (SEMH) – expansion and change of age range to provide primary annex	Primary provision opened in temporary provision in September 2020. Report due to go to Cabinet to appoint contractor for permanent build, to complete in Autumn 2021	Autumn 2021
Secondary medical PRU - 20 places	Provision moved temporarily to Worsfold House in September 2021. Officers at advanced stage to seek approval for a permanent location for the expanded numbers	2021/2022
ASD specialist school provision – 90 places	Adaption of existing council building to expand existing school is planned. This has been delayed by Covid but we are currently looking at school provider options.	2022/23
Further Additional Resourced Provision in primary schools	Consultation planned with schools that have space for a further provision	2022/23

Performance, Policy and Partnerships

- 2.63. The Performance, Policy and Partnerships supported the directorate during the recent Ofsted assurance visit. A key component was the submission of timely and accurate data – the so-called ‘Annex A’ data. I am pleased to report that the performance team was able to do so within timescale.
- 2.64. The preparatory work led by the Performance, Policy and Partnerships team meant that we were able to submit relevant strategies and other supporting documents in a timely fashion.

- 2.65. Having attracted corporate funding to address known issues with the case management system in Children's Social Care, we are now developing a workplan to take forward the necessary repair work. Our immediate focus will be to ensure that data recording and reporting supports the submission of statutory returns in May and June 2021.
- 2.66. A re-structure of the Performance, Policy and Partnerships team is nearing its conclusion. The re-structure was initiated to meet financial savings targets as well as increase our policy making capacity and capability.

Joint Commissioning and Partnerships

- 2.67. No update since the last report.

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