

Committee:

Date: 13th January 2021

Wards: All

Subject: Departmental Update

Lead officer: Hannah Doody, Director of Community and Housing, Interim Director of Children, Schools and Families

Lead member: Councillor Eleanor Stringer, Joint Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children 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 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. At the time of writing we have entered a second national lock-down. Following the Prime Minister's announcement on Monday, 4th January, all schools have been closed except for vulnerable children and children of critical workers. In response, the Children School and Families Directorate is taking the following measures:
 - We continue to have daily contact with Head Teachers providing guidance and support.
 - We have overseen the distribution of digital devices to vulnerable Merton children. This supports effective access to online learning.
 - We have amended our operating model for children's social care, and have ensure staff have access to PPE for visits that take place face-to-face

- A comprehensive testing programme is in operation, and we continue to monitor staff absences closely. We have identified a list of critical workers for vaccination
 - We are reviewing those children known/open to us but who are not in education or training with a view to ensure appropriate levels of support can be provided if required.
- 1.4. Our response to the Covid-19 remains fluid and responds to changes in risk. Members of the panel will be provided with an up-to-date verbal update at the meeting.

2 DETAILS

CHILDREN, SCHOOLS & FAMILIES

- 2.1. This is the first departmental update report you are receiving from me. This follows the departure of Rachael Wardell and my appointment as the interim Director of Children's and Adults Services. The current arrangements have been introduced on an interim basis, and the recruitment for a permanent DCS will start early in 2021.
- 2.2. I look forward to working with you during this period, and assure you that the work of the department will continue as planned.

Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion Division

- 2.3. The CSC & YI Division have seen an increase in the total number of children requiring social care intervention. As at end November 2020, there were over 200 more children receiving CSC services than at the same point in 2019/20.
- 2.4. Overall, since March 2020, there has not been an increase in the number of new children referred to CSC & YI in comparison to the previous year. This is because the increase in referrals since July 2020 is offset by the reduced level of referrals during the period of the first national lockdown.
- 2.5. The increased total number of children within the system arises for the following reasons:
- of the children entering the system, more have presented with needs and risks which require child protection enquiries (32% increase), child in need plans (22% increase) and child protection plans (52% increase)
 - there has been a change in the total throughput of children with plans with more plans being started and a lower ratio being ended. The Covid-19 restrictions have made it more difficult to progress the actions identified in children's plans and to secure non-statutory resources to support families to safely exit social care services.
- 2.6. As a result of the increased activity, particularly across the First Response and Safeguarding & Care Planning Services, social worker's caseloads are higher than the agreed limits. Temporary additional social work

resource is being mobilised to provide additional capacity and reduce caseloads.

- 2.7. The internal Covid-19 secure operating guidance for practitioners in CSC & YI was refreshed following the Tier 4 announcements in December 2020. All children and young people with an allocated social worker or personal advisor are being risk assessed to determine the type and frequency of visits. Essential direct and home visits, based on the identified risks, are taking place. Social workers and personal advisors making essential visits are supplied with full PPE and guidance about social distancing and hygiene measures.
- 2.8. Virtual video contacts with children and families are taking place where a visit is not essential and to compliment essential visits for children at higher risk.
- 2.9. Together with colleagues in the Education and Adult Social Care Division, a priority list of frontline staff requiring the Covid-19 vaccine has been prepared in readiness for doses of the vaccine being made available
- 2.10. The Learning & Improvement Board continues to be held to oversee learning from the Division's Quality Assurance framework and progress against the Division's Learning & Improvement Plan.

MASH & First Response

- 2.11. MASH has continued to operate remotely and remains effective in triaging incoming requests for support, statutory assessments and safeguarding interventions.
- 2.12. The First Response Service continues to undertake visits and direct interventions with children, young people and their families to complete assessments and child protection investigations.
- 2.13. First Response has recently moved from a position of 4 permanent Team Managers to 2 agency and 2 permanent Team Managers. One manager left to progress to a Service Manager position in another authority and another is transferring within Merton into the MASH Team Manager position.
- 2.14. Our MASH Team Manager has transferred, within Merton, into a Team Manager post in the 14 plus service. They had been a Team Manager in MASH and First Response Teams for 6 years and wanted a new experience. Our permanent Assistant Team Manager in the MASH has secured a 6-month secondment to a Team Manager post in the Safeguarding and Care Planning Service. This post will be filled by an agency Assistant Team Manager for the duration of the secondment
- 2.15. The MASH and First Response Service currently have 9 agency social workers covering permanent, temporary and absent post holder posts. We continue to try to recruit permanent staff which remains a challenge.
- 2.16. We have 3 ASYE Social Workers that have joined the service and are progressing well.

- 2.17. During Covid-19 we have had some very complex and high profile children and families to manage, seeing an increase in referrals from July, as the national lockdown restrictions were lifted and a return to the usual levels of referrals during the autumn.. The agreed caseloads for First Response are 10-12 each social worker and these have increased into the 20's. Managers and their teams are working hard to progress assessments and interventions in a safe and timely way. .
- 2.18. Performance on assessment timeliness is now back above target having dipped in September. The temporary dip was as a result of changes to the way in which assessment timeliness is being recorded. Previously, we would only count assessments open to MASH/First Response. We are now including assessments that are open to Safeguarding and Care Planning and Children with Disabilities. This has enabled us to put in place tighter oversight of assessments across the service.

Safeguarding and Care Planning

- 2.19. The service is currently operating with three fully staffed teams (SACP Team 2, Team 4 and CWD) and three teams are carrying social work vacancies (SACP Team 1, Team 5 and Team 6). The Social Workers in Schools Pilot Team continues to operate despite challenges related to COVID-19 issues in general. One of the Social Workers based in Melrose School left the pilot in December and we have made an offer to another agency social worker to come in and take over.
- 2.20. Feedback from the What Works Centre indicates Merton has made a success of the Social Workers in Schools Pilot so far and is slightly ahead of other boroughs on the pilot in terms of implementation.
- 2.21. The increase in the number of families requiring long term support either through child in need, child protection or children in care processes has meant the caseloads in the safeguarding service remain above agreed and optimum levels.
- 2.22. Many social workers have at least 20 children allocated with some at 25.. Children continue to come through from the First Response Service and are also transferring in from other boroughs. The Head of Service has adjusted the method of allocation of work within the service and is meeting with the whole SACP management group at least once per week to maintain a grip on incoming work and identifying work that will end across the service to try and hold caseload numbers until new staff can be appointed to release pressure in the system.
- 2.23. Ongoing agency and permanent recruitment continues. We have had limited success in bringing in suitably qualified agency social workers to immediately cover the vacant positions whilst we try to recruit permanent staff. Across the service (including CWD) there are 12 vacant social worker positions, 2 are maternity cover and 8 of these are covered with existing agency staff.
- 2.24. In November, a permanent recruitment advert closed with 21 applications. Interviews were offered to 10 applicants and 3 positions were offered. This was a good response. The majority of shortlisted candidates were newly

qualified social workers requiring ASYE support. Two of the three candidates accepted the offers of employment and will hopefully start in Feb / Mar 2021.

- 2.25. A strategy to bring in new social work staff and develop existing staff has been discussed within the CSC & YI Senior Leadership Team. The Head of SACP has met with Frontline and secured agreement to expand the Frontline offer to two units of trainee social work participants starting in September 2021. This will see eight trainee social workers join Merton on the Frontline programme who will then go on to fill newly qualified positions in the department at the end of their training. Over the forthcoming 2-3 years we are planning for a steady stream of high quality trained social workers grown within Merton as a longer term solution to the recruitment and retention challenges we face.
- 2.26. The Children with Disabilities Service Agency Team Manager left the department on the 20 November and since that time, the Assistant Team Manager has been covering the leadership of the CWD team. This is a temporary measure until the permanent Team Manager returns to the role following a period of secondment and then leave in January 2021.
- 2.27. A new Interim Team Manager joined SACP Team 1 in January 2021 seconded from the MASH service. This is for a period of 6 months covering the vacant permanent TM position for Team 1.
- 2.28. Direct social work visits to children and families have been maintained throughout the second lockdown period and the operating model has now been adjusted slightly to allow for virtual contact with children and families to be reintroduced as a measure to reduce the potential for COVID infection transmissions. The workforce has experienced minimal disruption in terms of COVID related staff sickness up to now. Social workers continue to work hard and go the extra mile to ensure Merton's children are safe.

Permanency, Looked After Children and Access to Resources Team

- 2.29. The numbers of children and young people in care remain stable.
- 2.30. The service is enjoying a period of staff stability with a stable, permanent, management group.
- 2.31. This stability is reflected in performance with children being frequently visited. All children who have not yet achieved their permanence plan continue to have regular permanency planning meetings to progress their plans. Work to strengthen Life Story Work has started.
- 2.32. The implementation of the fostering Mockingbird Family Model continues to progress.
- 2.33. Papers to advance the Shared Lives Scheme for care experienced young people, develop alternatives for supported accommodation and explore the costs and benefits of local authority-run children's homes were presented and endorsed at the second virtual Corporate Parenting Board in November.

Quality Assurance & Practice Development

- 2.34. Covid 19: since March 2020, QAPD continues to support and provide advice and guidance for practitioners. As per the agreed Covid-19 Secure operating model, the majority of IRO visits, conferences and reviews continue to take place virtually. A small number are held face to face where required and based on risk for child protection case conferences. IROs continue to meet with young people and where possible, hold reviews where the young person is fully engaged in the process and their voice leads the plans.
- 2.35. IROs continue to focus on areas to develop including strengthening advocacy, how we share outcomes of reviews with children via letters rather than formal minutes, and the use of letters of introduction for the young person when IROs are allocated. Actions to address these issues are in motion. In addition, we have identified actions, in collaboration with other service areas and social workers, to strengthen permanency planning and life story work.
- 2.36. Audit programme: We continue to undertake monthly collaborative audits and these form part of the monthly reports to the Learning and Improvement Board to inform the improvement and staff development plans. We have made significant progress in identifying the existing areas of good 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 consistency and quality of the monthly collaborative audit programme has reached a good level and no longer requires Head of Service moderation.
- 2.37. Practice weeks: We successfully held a third in November 2020. The overview report is currently being prepared for presentation to CSMT and the Learning and Improvement Board. Practice weeks enable the service to identify strong practice and provides leaders from across Children, Schools and Families with windows into service delivery and the impact this has on children across the directorate to strengthen the development of strategy, policy and practice.
- 2.38. There has been a significant increase in Initial Child Protection Conferences with a move from 136 to 160 children with child protection plans. Timeliness in convening a conference remains a strength in Merton. The increase in child protection plans is a result of greater incidence of:
- unborn babies assessed to be at risk of significant harm,
 - parental mental health issues,
 - families with complex and multiple difficulties
 - larger brother and sister groups.
- 2.39. The Service are also now progressing those children where transfers both into and out of the local authority is required now that the restrictions on transfers as a result of the Covid-19 restrictions have been lifted.

- 2.40. The numbers of children and young people in care remains stable. A small number of children in care reviews were delayed due to unplanned absences within the IRO group. The availability of courts to hear and list children's care proceedings for final orders has been a challenge since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. The service continues to liaise with CAFCASS, SLLP, the local and regional judiciary to progress scheduling arrangements and identify approaches to ease the current backlogs.
- 2.41. Training and development, we continue to offer all training virtually. Our training programme is mapped into a career pathway, which is linked to 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.
- 2.42. To maintain the current Practice Model, we have commissioned a comprehensive Signs of Safety training programme and sponsored social workers to attend the accredited foundation year of systemic practice.
- 2.43. As a service, we are currently under strength in terms of being able to support and resource practice development and learning across children's social care. We continue to use an interim auditor and a QA Permanence Lead manager as it has been a challenge to identify and recruit a suitably qualified individual on a permanent basis. The Fostering Independent Reviewing office left the Service last month and unfortunately the interim replacement resigned for personal reasons shortly after taking up the appointment.
- 2.44. An interim agency Head of QAPD has been appointed and will start in post on 11 January to cover the temporary secondment of the permanent Head of Service to the Adolescent and Family Service.
- 2.45. Permanent recruitment to some posts within the service is on hold pending the launch of a HR consultation regarding re-organisation proposals.

Adolescent and Family Service

- 2.46. The permanent Head of Service left Merton in November 2020 following promotion to a role in another borough. Interim arrangements have been made for the permanent Head of Service for QAPD to cover the role until the conclusion of the forthcoming HR consultation regarding re-organisation proposals.
- 2.47. The Youth Justice Team has continued to see young people where virtual engagement options have not been effective or sufficient. The Recovery Plan submitted to the Youth Justice Board in October is being reviewed in light of the increase in Covid-19 restrictions and will be presented to the Youth Crime Executive Board in January 2021.
- 2.48. **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 interventions.
- 2.49. A Contextual Harm protocol and suite of practitioner tools has been launched to draw together the different strands of contextual harm and

strengthen assessment, safety planning and intervention practice across the Service. A multi-agency Contextual Harms Strategy is in the process of being finalised by the MSCP Promote and Protect Young People Sub-Group.

- 2.50. **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.
- 2.51. **The 14+ Service** resumed visits to care experienced young adults in October following relaxation of the Covid-19 restrictions over the Summer. Introduction of Tier 4 and further national lockdown restrictions has returned visits back to virtual contact unless an assessment of risk to the young adult determines a direct visit to be essential

Education Division

School Improvement

- 2.52. Officers in the school improvement team have continued to work with all maintained schools (and some academies) to help refocus them on their strategic school improvement. This has included meetings of Support and Challenge Groups for schools that have these in place. They have also supported schools with their Covid responses, and to plan to help them follow the many pieces of Government guidance issued this term.
- 2.53. The final part of term has been focussed on enabling schools to provide Covid tests for all their staff, to support a safe return to school in January.
- 2.54. Now that we are in lockdown again, Merton schools have moved to remote education for many pupils. Merton schools have worked hard to develop their remote learning offer, and whilst this has included trying to ensure that all pupils have access to a digital device to be able to access the learning (as appropriate) online, they are very mindful of the need to ensure those pupils who do not have devices can access the learning in other ways (including, of course, through paper copies).
- 2.55. Many schools already have devices available for loan to disadvantaged pupils who need them – one secondary school already has a policy that ensures all pupils have a school device, and some other secondary schools are following suit, introducing devices year by year as pupils come into the school. This is of course dependent on school budgets.
- 2.56. 'Keeping Kids Connected', from the Wimbledon Dons (and other charities) are supplying reconditioned devices to schools. The Dons have worked with almost all Merton schools so far, and their plans are to continue to provide devices as and when they become available.
- 2.57. In addition, the Government has/had had three schemes to enable some disadvantaged pupils to have devices:

- Year 10 scheme – this happened in the summer term, and all secondary schools had an allocation for their Year 10 students
 - Children with a social worker scheme – again this took place in the summer term, allowing the council to allocate to children known to Children’s Social Care
 - Current scheme – when a school has a certain number of pupils absent isolating, they are able to order devices from the DfE. Some schools were able to order last term, but allocations have increased to the original number promised by the DfE, and all schools in Merton are now able to order their full allocation. Many schools are still awaiting delivery.
- 2.58. The Council has also committed £20,000 to fund devices/wifi connections for disadvantaged pupils across the Borough. These will be distributed to schools with the largest proportion of pupils eligible for Free School Meals as soon as possible.
- 2.59. Schools have been allocated ‘Catch Up’ funding to support pupils this academic year, following learning loss experienced as a result of the summer term lockdown. Throughout last term schools assessed pupils to identify which pupils required additional support, and began to use the funding to implement interventions. The majority of schools have chosen to use their own staff (some newly recruited) for this work; a few are looking to use tutors available through the National Tutoring Programme.
- 2.60. Schools are required to publish their plans for the use of the Catch Up funding; these plans will be monitored by Merton Education Partners during the spring term.

Education Inclusion

- 2.61. 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. The team have taken group work on line, proving cooking, craft and Christmas wreath making for highly vulnerable young people. These workshops have proved very popular. They are a good way to engage with young people who feel too vulnerable to leave their house. The team have been tracking by phone all term to identify young people who are NEET. Engagement activity with employers is still strong as many employers are still looking to support vulnerable young people into work in the medium term. Young people at risk of homelessness is coming up increasingly as families and their relationships are displaced by the pandemic.
- 2.62. The Merton information and Advice Service has continued to support parents of children with special educational needs and receive positive feedback. The return to school and then subsequent lockdown has affected parents of children with disabilities significantly. In addition, the team are introducing a new database that will allow for improved management data from the team.
- 2.63. Merton's participation service has also moved to on line workshops notably cooking session for care experienced young people. They team has

recruited a new participation worker who started just before Christmas. The young inspectors have been working closely with public health and the CCG mental health commissioner on a range of projects.

- 2.64. The Education Welfare Service continues to support core children missing education functions as well as encouraging attendance at schools. We saw a significant increase in off rolling by schools at the end of the summer term. This was largely families moving back to countries of origin in the EU as firms relocated. There was also some delayed house moves. The tracking of these families has taken a considerable amount of time. Families choosing to Elective Home educate has rising significantly in line with the national rise of approx. 38%. Merton had by the end of September the same number of families we would normally have in a year. This rise was significantly at primary school age. Notably there was a high proportion of people leaving private schools to home educate. School attendance levels were strong in September. They have declined, as positive Covid-19 cases have increased in schools.
- 2.65. The Behaviour Support Service continued to support vulnerable children in schools. Teachers and Behaviour support assistants continue to go in to schools daily to support schools and very vulnerable children. The team is running the DfE-supported training for return to school with advice and support on children mental health which has been taken up well by schools in Merton. The team is running training and supporting individual cases to help them manage in school. The team worked with the CCG to run a Mental Health School leads forum that focused in part on supporting the mental health needs of staff.
- 2.66. The Language and Learning Service has moved back to providing in-school Speech and Language therapy and learning assessments within a Covid Risk assessment this term. A significant number of dyslexia assessments were completed with the additional support in the team. Children have seen therapists in schools daily.
- 2.67. The Youth Service has reopened and delivered 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 previous years due to the limitation of group size. Under the second lockdown, the service had to close for groups but one to ones with young people can continue and calls to families. The service supported by Sainsbury's produced 70 hampers to deliver to families in Mitcham.

Early Years, Family Wellbeing and Early Help

Early Years Provision – Funded Places Scheme (scrutiny request)

- 2.68. During the pandemic, Merton has continued to fund all providers who were expecting to deliver 2, 3 and 4 year old funded places and the overall supply of places continues to broadly meet parental demand. From January 2021, funded education providers are expected to continue to provide childcare and early learning to all families (not just keyworkers and vulnerable families) and our provider support team continue to give significant guidance, advice and support to all early years and childcare settings. Local data to compare take up in autumn term 2019 and autumn

term 2020 shows a drop in 2 year take up of around 100 places (reduction of 23%), in universal entitlement for 3 and 4 year olds of around 221 places (8% reduction) and a small increase in the 30 hour take up of 37 places (5% increase). With an anticipated overall reduction in the spring term, it is expected that Early Years DSG budgets for 2021/22 will be negatively impacted, in spite of a raise in the hourly rate for each place taken up from 2021.

- 2.69. Support for the early years sector continues, with a high volume of enquiries and ongoing communications and distribution of important information. The late autumn and Christmas holiday period saw increases in the number of EY settings temporarily closing or reducing their service offer due to Covid

Children's Centres

- 2.70. Merton's network of Children's Centres continue to provide remote support to families, as well as continuing to offer some community spaces to our partner health services. Our plans for reintroducing some services are currently being reviewed in light of the new restrictions and the possible impact of these for direct delivery of Children's Centre groups.

Support for families with a child aged under 5 with SEND

- 2.71. For families in this cohort, staff continue to offer services remotely, and we are urgently reviewing our direct work which includes home visiting and centre based activities

Direct services childcare

- 2.72. 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 times, weekends and the holidays for children with severe and complex special educational needs. The Brightwell service was recognised in the recent Ofsted visit with the following feedback "*Severely disabled children and their parents and carers were helped by continued support and respite from specialist in house out of school provision during lockdown. Packages were adapted and tailored, alongside careful risk assessments, which allowed the vast majority children who attended respite to continue to do so, either in the evening, daytime or weekends while their schools were shut during lockdown. Many of the children have highly complex medical conditions, and the confidence and trust of their parents in the manager and staff at the respite centre is clearly very high.*"

Family Wellbeing Service

- 2.73. Staff across the service have been 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), after a period of closure for refurbishment and improvements.

Early Help and service development

- 2.74. A review of Merton's shortbreak offer for disabled children will start this term, coproduced with parents, children and young people and partners, aiming for a refreshed offer for the new academic year in 2021.
- 2.75. Our new Early Help Co-ordinators continue to have provide remote information and sign-posting about local services, and moved to a new offer of direct work in some Children's Centres supporting professionals and families in navigating early help pathways of support. Face to face work is under review in light of the new restrictions and the requirement to deliver essential services only.
- 2.76. 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 over the next few weeks, with the aim of producing our new strategy and associated documents in March/ April 2021.
- 2.77. The announcement for a further year of funding for the national Troubled Families Programme 2021/22, is welcomed, and this funding will continue to support improvements in the overall early help system, the transformation of Early Help services, as well as the engagement, confidence and skills of partners across the multi-agency sector, with a particular focus on building on the existing work and best practice in schools. .

Special Educational Needs Service and EHCPs (scrutiny request)

- 2.78. The Special Educational Needs and Disabilities integrated service has continued to see increased demand for statutory assessments. Currently, we have 2280 Education, Health and Care plans and are undertaking 171 new Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment
- 2.79. There continues to be a delay in meeting the 20-week timescale during COVID. This has been for a number of reasons exacerbated by the pandemic including: staffing issues within partner agencies, late professional advice delaying planning meetings and in a small number of cases parents not engaging with assessments and/or planning meetings. It is envisaged that the current restrictions will continue to impact on the ability to undertake assessments for pupils who are not in the school setting, professionals being redeployed and parents not consenting to assessments to take place on line or face to face.
- 2.80. 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 ceased on 25th September 2020. All cases since the 1st May and 25th September had the Coronavirus exception applied and

this is reported to the DfE. The current restrictions will continue to impact on meeting the timelines for EHC Needs assessments and we are awaiting further information as to whether the law will be temporarily amended again.

- 2.81. The service re-organisation which was due to be completed in March 2020 was delayed due to COVID and was embedded in November 2020. We have a full complement of EHC Co-ordinators who started in October and November and the third SEN Manager also started in November to have management oversight of the 14+ team. This will add increased management capacity to better manage and increase the quality of the work undertaken by the SEN Team and the new EHC Co-ordinators have meant that the caseloads of officers have decreased to 185 from over 200. The new officers are focusing on annual review processes and the improved quality of the EHCPs. We have added an additional EHC Co-ordinator into the Assessment team to improve timescales and quality of new EHCPs. We are still in the process of recruiting the Tribunal/complaints Manager and this should be advertised in January 2021.
- 2.82. The HoS and the CCG have developed 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 which will commence in February 2021 this will improve the quality of the professional advice and processes relating to children's social care. The National Development Team for Inclusion has provided training to children and adults social care teams and the special educational needs teams on Transitions and Preparation for Adulthood.
- 2.83. Since the last scrutiny meeting, we have met with the DfE and NHS England on two occasions who reviewed our progress on the Written Statement of Action - Action Plan. The feedback from the first meeting and the second meeting gave supportive challenge on how the LA and CCG could evidence impact of the work that has been undertaken. The working group will collate case studies together to evidence the improvement in practice and quality of the work that is being undertaken.
- 2.84. The SEN case management system is being implemented and was due to go live in January 2021 however due to data migration issues this has now been delayed until April 2021 - we are currently negotiating the go live date. 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, parent's, young people and professionals.

Contracts and School Organisation

- 2.85. **School admissions and school meals:** The School Admissions Service continues to operate as normal, with closing dates for 2021 secondary applications on 31 October 2020, and primary applications on 15 January 2021. The secondary application process has been more difficult for staff this year as,

due to Covid, Sutton and Kingston Grammar schools tested after the application process rather than before and so it was necessary to allow late preference changes for children that did not pass the Grammar school test, which have still not flowed through.

- 2.86. There is a continued increase in children eligible for free school meals, and more families asking for eligibility checks. The service has been heavily involved in the provision of free school meals allowances over the school holidays, administering Merton's local scheme with schools in the October half term, and the Covid winter grant over the Christmas holidays. This has required working with schools and administering their claims for £40 per child, and working to tight timescales with the Early years team to set up a process for families with pre-school school children to claim eligibility using the same process as for school age pre-school meals. We have also worked with colleagues in Community and Housing to target some of the resource to local food banks, and to advertise Merton's Covid-19 Community Response Hub through schools. 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.
- 2.87. **Harris Academy Wimbledon:** The school opened successfully in its new building in South Wimbledon the week after the October half term
- 2.88. The construction contract for the expansion of Melrose School has been agreed and work is starting in earnest at the start of January. In the meantime, the school is providing for primary aged children for the first time in a temporary classroom in an adjacent building.
- 2.89. **Four Schools PFI Contract:** Officers have continued to work with a specialist to hold the PFI contractor to account, and continue to hold meetings with Directors of the PFI company to seek change to the benefit of the schools. It is expected that there will be changes to the contract over the next few months, with the aim that it will be in place for September 2022.
- 2.90. **SEND Home to School transport commissioning:** This service continued to be extremely busy, with near normal travel levels again, appropriate procedures needing to be followed during this Covid period, and inevitable changes to administer as school bubbles close and re-open. This is a significant spend area for the council and one of the transformation projects identified by the council.
- SEND provision (scrutiny request)
- 2.91. 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 provision opened in temporary provision in September 2020. Following Cabinet approval construction has commenced for | Autumn 2021 |

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| primary annex | permanent build, to complete in 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

- 2.92. The Performance, Policy and Partnerships Team meeting is in the process of recruiting to a number of vacancies in the Policy and Partnerships Team. These vacancies are available due to a recent re-structure. The re-structure was driven by the need to meet savings requirements. It provided an opportunity to re-focus activity on service improvement and innovation alongside more established functions such as supporting existing multi-agency boards.
- 2.93. 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.

Joint Commissioning and Partnerships

- 2.94. 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.
- 2.95. 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.

2.96. 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