

# CSF – Departmental Update

Presented to

Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel

February 2021

# Schools/Early Years Update

- **Nurseries/Early Years:** Under national guidance, nurseries and early years settings remain open for all children. A small number of Merton nurseries have had to close due to Covid-related staff sickness and isolation. We are actively engaging with the PVI sector with regards to regular staff testing.
- **Merton schools:** remain open to vulnerable children and the children of key workers in all year groups, and nursery classes are open to all children. Weekly meetings with primary, secondary and special school headteachers continue, with heads reporting that both remote and onsite learning is embedding well but staff are feeling tired. All schools will close for February half-term.
- **Mass asymptomatic testing using Lateral Flow Devices in schools** – Secondary and special schools are testing staff on site weekly. Secondary schools tested all pupils on site on return and some schools are continuing to test pupils on site weekly. Primary school staff are testing twice weekly at home. Enhanced testing has taken place in the four schools in the Pollards Hill area.
- **Digital Devices and remote learning:** All schools have now ordered their first allocation of Digital Devices from the DfE; a further allocation has just been announced for specific schools. Some schools are reporting that this will be adequate for their pupils' needs, others are reporting that they need more. Across Merton schools are reporting that approx. 1,100 additional devices are needed. The council has a clear picture of where those gaps are and is directing offers of devices towards schools that need it most. The council also agreed £20,000 to go towards devices for schools where levels of disadvantage are higher. These devices are now being purchased for distribution.
- **School Attendance:** no longer compulsory, but for vulnerable children is 'expected' and will be encouraged. Attendance is much higher than previous lockdown. We have run a Covid Children missing Education Process again and reviewed the educational engagement of all children on school age with a social worker in Merton across 3 panels. Attendance is higher than previous lockdown of children with social workers and more have access to digital devices. Social workers are discussing with families where it would be beneficial for children to be in school and they are not.
- **Free School Meals:** for benefits related FSM children not attending, schools are providing a £15 per week supermarket voucher. We used the government winter grant to pay £40 per child over the Christmas period (including pre-school children) and will be paying £20 per child to cover the February half term.
- **School admissions:** Children put on roll even if they need to start remotely. Secondary offer day as normal on 1 March 2020

# Special educational provision

- **SEND:** Special Schools remain open for all children. We are working closely with our maintained special schools and health partners to ensure that pupils can attend safely during national lockdown. The Government has not made temporary changes to special educational needs and disability legislation (Section 42 of the Children and Families Act) during the current Tier 5 restrictions. This means that the LA and the CCG is required to deliver the provision outlined within a pupils Education Health and Care Plans and comply with the statutory timescales for phased transfers, new EHC Needs Assessments, and Annual Reviews.

The numbers of children with an EHCP in school continues to be monitored and is higher in this lockdown than previous lock-downs.

- **Home to school transport:** Service running as per government Covid guidance for lower number of SEND children attending provision
- **Service Update:** The department continues to receive referrals for EHCS. Levels of referrals have remained in line with average monthly referral rate pre-pandemic. Sensory team continues to provide clinical and face-to-face services as do the Educational Psychology Service, Virtual Behaviour Services and all other services provided in schools and settings. Our respite centre has been open and continues to provide services for some of our children with complex needs.

# Service Updates & Feedback from Children & Young People

- **Youth Work:** Under National Youth Association Guidelines all youth centres and the Adventure playground must be closed. The APG is providing play space for individual families with no space to play by referral from Social Workers. Youth Centres are offering on line, detached and individual calls to young people
- **Early Years Direct Provision/Family Wellbeing:** Services continue to be delivered remotely and face-to-face to families and children presenting with a wide range of needs.
- **BAU services** are continuing to carry out key functions such as responding to statutory returns, weekly Covid-returns to the DfE as well as business support functions.
- **Feedback from children and young people:** Throughout the lock-down our services have been collecting feedback from children and young people. This feedback has not been systematically analysed but here is a flavour of what they have said.

Children and young people have told us the following:

- They have found this lockdown harder
- They are concerned about falling behind
- They have found on-line lessons all day exhausting and many express concerns about their Mental health
- 'Off The Record' Mental health support have seen a significant rise in self referrals for mental health support.

# Children's Social Care & Youth Inclusion Update

## Children and Young People:

- All CSC & YI services continue to be delivered
- Individual risk assessments have been completed for all children with a social worker, personal advisor or youth justice practitioner
- Essential safeguarding, crime prevention and support visits are taking place face-to-face
- Where risk to children and young people is lower, interventions are taking place using virtual technology
- Personal Advisors are having more frequent
- School attendance of vulnerable children with a social worker is being promoted and is overseen by a regular CSC and Education Panel
- DfE supplied devices and routers have been and continue to be provided to vulnerable children to support remote learning and contact with the professional network supporting the family
- Family and professional network meetings are being held using virtual technology
- Care experienced young adults are receiving additional allowances to support them to meet the increased costs of food, internet access and heating
- Our local Police colleagues have been briefed about social workers and practitioners meeting with children in the community, parks and other open spaces as part of efforts to practice social distancing
- We are continuing to work with CCG and health colleagues to ensure Health Visiting support for babies and young children
- Domestic abuse reports in Merton have remained steady and consistent with the previous year

# Children's Social Care & Youth Inclusion Update (cont/d)

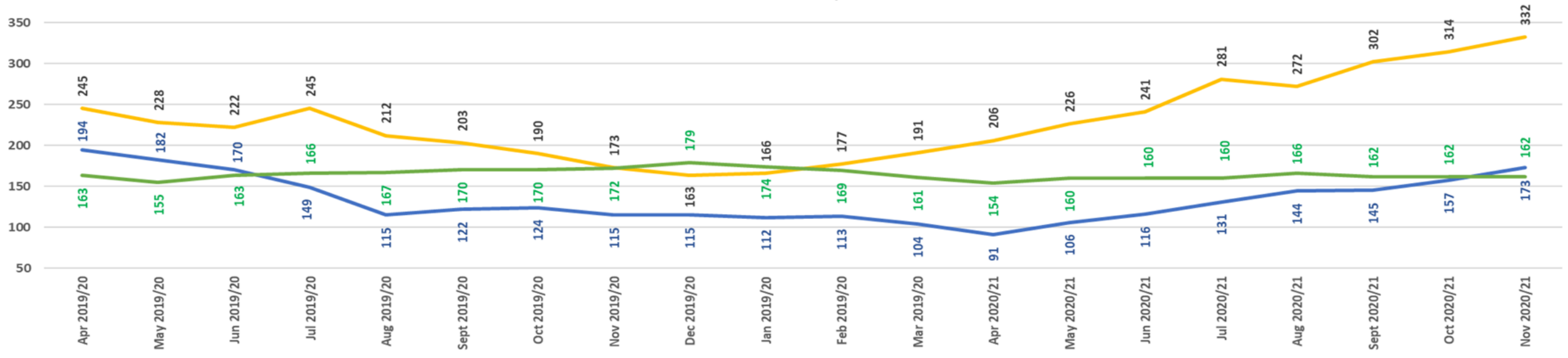
## Demand (as at November 2020):

- There has been an increase in the number of children in the Children's Social Care system by 211 in comparison to the previous year
- The total number of new children being referred into the service since April 2020 has remained consistent with the previous year.
- The number of children in care has remained consistent.
- 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%), child in need plans (22%) and child protection plans (52%)
  - there has been change in the total throughput of children with plans with more plans being started and a lower ratio being ended

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Children's Services

Children with a CIN Plan    Children Subject to a CPP    Children in Care



# Children's Social Care & Youth Inclusion Update (cont/d)

## Workforce – Capacity and Welfare

- All frontline social care staff and foster carers are eligible for and have been receiving the vaccine and regular testing
- All social workers and practitioners undertaking face-to-face essential visits are provided with full PPE
- The Covid-19 Secure Practice Guidance remains in operation to support staff with safe and risk assessed interventions
- A spike in Covid-19 staff absences witnessed in January has begun to subside. We have seen higher numbers of staff who are experiencing personal bereavements as a direct result of Covid-19.
- Social workers in the First Response and Safeguarding and Care Planning Service continue to hold a high number of children (20-25 children). Coupled with staff absences and bereavements, this is leading to staff fatigue and tiredness.
- Staff from non-frontline facing social work functions in QAPD Service have been temporarily re-deployed to support essential visits and assessments. Consequently, some aspects of the core business of QAPD, has been suspended.
- We have secured temporary resources to recruit additional operational management and social work capacity and are in the process of recruitment. The additional management capacity is in place, as a result of pan-London pressures on available social workers this aspect of the recruitment is slower.
- The senior leadership team continue to monitor staff wellbeing. Managers are providing regular team and individual check-ins, the Employee Assistance Programme is being promoted and the Assistant Director holds a virtual 'Keeping in Touch' session every fortnight.
- Practice Week 1-7 February focussed on 'Celebration & Well-Being' with whole directorate Virtual Staff Conferences; Supervision workshops, Sparkling Practice Sessions and staff check-ins

# Children's Social Care & Youth Inclusion Update (cont/d)

## Recovery & Transformation

- The project to expand the Shared Lives programme to offer supported accommodation to 16 and 17 year olds and care experienced young adults is being finalised
- Recruitment of independent consultants for the Residential Placements and Clinical Systemic Social Care Interventions reviews are in motion
- Partnership work to co-produce a replacement of the Merton Wellbeing Model – 'Effective Support for Children & Families in Merton' is complete and scheduled for public consultation alongside the Early Help Strategy
- Review of the CSC & YI staffing establishment and budget has been completed and the CSC & YI Re-organisation is scheduled to commence formal staff consultation in March 2021
- The improvement project to repair the CSC electronic recording system, Mosaic, has started and is being overseen by a Mosaic Change Board
- The annual review of the Self-Assessment, in preparation for the Annual Engagement Meeting with Ofsted, is in motion
- The Youth Justice Service is working under the Covid-19 Recovery Plan submitted to the Youth Justice Board and overseen by the Youth Crime Prevention Executive Board.
- There is ongoing collaboration with the West London Family Court to progress the backlog of care proceedings and secure permanency for children
- The service continues to provide online virtual training to maintain a skilled and supported workforce and ensure continued professional development for social workers to maintain their registration.
- The Learning & Improvement Quality Assurance Cycle has been amended to account for the impact of the temporary re-deployment of QAPD staff