

Committee: Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel

Date: 23rd June 2021

Wards: All

Subject: Departmental Update

Lead officer: Jane McSherry, Director of Children, Schools and Families

Lead member: Councillor Eleanor Stringer, 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. During the Covid pandemic, members of the scrutiny panel were provided with an abridged departmental update focussing on the department's responses to the crisis. Now that we are emerging from lock-down measures, members of the scrutiny panel will be provided with a more detailed updates on key pieces of work across the division.
- 1.3. For the first time, this departmental update report now contains an additional section on the department's contributions to the council wide transformation programme.

2 DETAILS

CHILDREN, SCHOOLS & FAMILIES

- 2.1. This is my first departmental update report since being appointed Director of Children's Services. I am pleased to take over a department that has managed to respond to the challenges posed by the Covid pandemic in such an emphatic way.
- 2.2. My first weeks in my new post have already been very eventful. At the end of May, HMI Probation inspected our Youth Justice Service and the strategic partnership providing governance for youth crime prevention. At the time of writing, we have not received the formal report with judgements; we are expecting this in August. However, I am pleased to say that the inspectors were impressed with the partnership working in

Merton and we were able to share some really innovative and effective practice supporting some of our society's most vulnerable young people. I would particularly like to commend Jennifer Williams, our Service Manager for Youth Justice, for her role throughout the inspection.

- 2.3. A large-scale consultation for a proposed re-structure of the Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion Division has now concluded. Consultation responses are being reviewed before putting in place a revised structure. I acknowledge that this process can cause some anxiety to individuals effected by the change. I am working tirelessly with my senior managers to ensure there is no disruption to services to children and their families.
- 2.4. In last month, I have appointed two interim Assistant Directors. Nick Wilson has joined the council as AD for Education and Early Help and Sue Myers has joined as AD for Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion. The recruitment to the permanent posts is underway.
- 2.5. I am conscious that I am writing this introduction just over a year after the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent emergence of the Black Lives Matters Movement. We have also seen responses to the murder to Sarah Everard, and the sometimes difficult feedback we are hearing about young people's experience of sexual abuse and harassment. In addition, we have been and continue to respond to the challenges that the current pandemic bring to our residents and our staff. Our informed responses to all these areas of work will be part of my focus as I take up the leadership of this directorate.
- 2.6. I very much look forward to leading a directorate that is clear about its purpose, proud of its achievements and know where we need to improve in the interest of Merton children, young people and their families.

Supporting Vulnerable Children

- 2.7. As the constraints around Covid-19 formally decrease and we depart from the current restrictions, the service has increased engagement with young people with more face to face visits and meetings replacing virtual contact arrangements.
- 2.8. Young people have told us about their emotional and mental health issues during the Covid lockdown. Many felt isolated from their peers and friendship networks. For some, the lockdown had adverse impacts on family relationships. We continue to work alongside colleagues in Health, Education, CAMHs and key partners such as Catch 22 to ensure the right support is available and specific to the individual needs of young people.
- 2.9. Our children's assessment and safeguarding social care teams have faced the dual pressure of increasing demand for services together with challenges recruiting interim social workers pending a conclusion to the proposed restructure process. The current increase in demand is most evident in the increased number of referrals, assessments and children requiring child protection plans with sustained increases in referrals over

the last 3 months. Caseloads in the assessment and safeguarding teams are higher than they were last year and are above the optimum levels.

- 2.10. The increase in the number of children we are currently working with is, however, not reflected in an increase in the number of children in our care. The numbers of unaccompanied asylum seeking children entering our care has reduced and we have seen a slight decrease for those young people in care. The number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children is likely to increase as travel restrictions across Europe ease and the Government introduces a refreshed National Transfer Scheme.
- 2.11. In response to these dual pressures, we have, and continue to take, a range of pro-active actions including:
- a) Flexible deployment of the Social Workers in Schools Team and the temporary additional social work team to absorb additional children from both the assessment and safeguarding social care services.
 - b) Introduction of weekly Panels, chaired by Heads of Service, to expedite out of children's social care those children who can be supported by the Family Wellbeing Service
 - c) Development of proposals to establish temporary additional staff in the targeted Early Help team to increase capacity to safely divert children from social care.
 - d) A weekly meeting, chaired by the Assistant Director, to review caseloads and capacity across the whole social care Division to maximise all available resources.
 - e) A monthly meeting, chaired by Heads of Service, to review progression of child protection plans.
 - f) Introduction of daily caseload reports to all social care managers, Heads of Service, ADs and the DCS to aid transparency, scrutiny and agile decision-making.
 - g) A focussed audit of children with child protection plans, our child protection processes and decision-making to inform understanding of the factors driving the current increase and assist in the development of actions to address these.
 - h) Increased placements of student social workers, and supporting consultant social workers, to enhance the number of social worker available for recruitment next year.
- 2.12. The formal consultation on the re-structure proposals in Children Social Care concluded on 21 May. Additional resources have been engaged to review the consultation feedback and progress the organisational change process. We anticipate reaching a decision about the way forward by the end of July with mobilisation to a new structure beginning in August.
- 2.13. A revised practice model of 'Relationship Based Practice' was soft launched in the service in February following a period of consultation. Social workers and managers have also been involved in developing a

practice standard booklet which, to reflect a new structure, is planned for publication once a decision about the reorganisation is reached.

- 2.14. The Education Welfare Service continues to support core safeguarding and licencing functions under lockdown and has been supporting schools with the return of children after the spring lockdown. 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 continued to be a significant rise in parents choosing **Elective Home Education** for their children since last summer. This is a trend that has been reported nationally. Schools have been supported with their new attendance requirements and processes.
- 2.15. The Behaviour Support Service continued to support **vulnerable children** in school during lockdown and since. Infection control regulations have limited the number of children who can be supported across schools each day. The team run a range of virtual training and mentoring sessions which are again being planned for year 6 to 7 children. A virtual transition event linking every secondary school with feeder primaries to share information to successfully support transition of children new to year 7 will run again this year. This process was well received by schools last year. 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. To build on our existing three **Trailblazer mental health in schools** clusters in Merton an additional CCG funded cluster has just started linking together all the other Mitcham and some Morden schools who are not currently offered cluster support. It is our ambition with the CCG that all schools will be offered to be in a Mental Health in schools cluster.
- 2.16. The quality assurance and practice development service have now returned from nearly 4 months of frontline practice to support the assessment service. Their support to learning and development of practice through the quality assurance framework has resumed with Practice Week taking place in May, the monthly collaborative audit cycle re-starting and an adjusted audit plan to focus on key issues for the rest of the year.
- 2.17. After unavoidable delays due to Covid-19, we launched the 'Mockingbird Fostering Model' via an online event last month. The model is intended to provide closer relationships and enhanced support between a specific group of foster carers. The event was well-attended, and provides a solid foundation on which to progress our ambitions for children in care and the fostering service.

Supporting Children & Young People with Special Educational Needs

- 2.18. Increased demand for statutory assessments has continued. There are currently **2,356 Education, Health and Care plans** and 149 new Education, Health and Care Needs Assessments.
- 2.19. Since the beginning of the year we have seen a gradual increase in meeting the 20-week statutory timescale for issuing Education Health and Care Plans. Our year-to-date figure (calendar year) was 77% in March, and in February we issued 100% of EHCPs within the 20 week timescale (total 10 EHCPs for the month). The improvement in meeting timescales is as a result of our work with partners to improve processes for receiving professional advice from across the partnership within the 6 week statutory timescale.
- 2.20. Statutory partners continued to implement the training programme for education, health and social care staff. This has been delivered by a number of providers including the Head of Service SEND, the Council for Disabled Children, the National Development Team for Inclusion and the Designated Clinical Offer which has resulted in an improvement in the quality of professional advice.
- 2.21. Since the last scrutiny meeting, we have met with the DfE and NHS England who reviewed the partnership's response to the SEND inspection (May 2019). The feedback from this meeting outlined the ongoing requirement for strategic co-ordination and leadership of the SEND Reforms within Merton across all partner agencies.
- 2.22. The SEN case management system went live in May 2021. This is a major milestone and will, once embedded allow the SEN Team to process, track and report on statutory activities more efficiently and enhance the council's data security and governance.

Supporting Families

- 2.23. The all-age (0-25) Family Wellbeing Service is now delivering a combination of remote and face-to-face work, both with families on a one to one basis and also group and remote parenting programmes. Snap shot information in April showed an **open case load of 138 families with 284 children** which included those in the assessment process and families being supported by a family plan. The summer term sees the introduction of a new suite of all age evidenced based Parenting Programmes including Triple P and the Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities parenting programmes as part of the mental health trailblazer offer in schools.
- 2.24. The **Troubled Families local programme** met 95% (183) of its Payment by Results target for achieving sustained improved outcomes for families. Work is taking place for our delivery plans for the new reshaped MHCLG programme, renamed Supporting Families for 21/22. We have been successful in our bid for grant funding for the DWP Reducing Parental Conflict programme, delivering a range of training and support for professionals in their practice and interactions with families in this area.

Early Years Provision – Funded Places Scheme

- 2.25. 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 2020 all funded education providers were open and our provider support team has given significant guidance, advice and support to all early years and childcare settings. The 2021 summer term has required a further government headcount process in order to take into account any financial impact to the Early Years DSG in light of Covid.
- 2.26. Our take-up of places across the 2 year, 15 hour and 30 hour offer is lower than last year, and therefore this will require careful financial and place planning to ensure that the sector remains responsive, sustainable and of high quality. We anticipate reduced demand across all age group funded places, and a likely oversupply of places. The impact of Covid is still not wholly apparent in terms of changes to local work patterns and demand for early years places across the borough. Early provisional information suggests there is a reduction in intake across all early year ages. We are awaiting the publication of official figures.

Children’s Centres

- 2.27. Merton’s network of Children’s Centres continues to provide a mix of remote and face to face group support to families, as well as continuing to offer community spaces to our partner health services. We have seen increased take-up of services over the spring and summer term and we are planning for a wider offer over the summer holidays.
- 2.28. In the year 20/21, during the pandemic, we have had contact in our centres (across our own services and multi-agency partners) with **90% (1344) of all families** with a child under the age of 3 living in areas of deprivation (30% most deprived areas in Merton using IDACI 2019). Families who replied to our satisfaction surveys scored 100% for our universal Baby Early Learning Together Programme and 94% for our early help Early Learning Together programme.

Support for families with a child aged under 5 with SEND

- 2.29. For families in this cohort, staff from the Early Years, Family Wellbeing and Early Help service continued to offer services directly through home visiting, garden sessions or a one to one session in our Children’s Centres. Take-up of our Portage and SEND Family Support and Parenting offer has been high, with all families engaging in our offer, and over 95% taking up face-to-face services once reintroduced.

Direct services childcare

- 2.30. Our in-house nursery and early years preschools continue to remain open through the lock-down. Brightwell specialist out of school provision

remains open, providing ongoing services both during the school term, weekends and the holidays for children with severe and complex special educational needs.

Supporting Schools

- 2.31. Schools continue to operate within **Covid secure guidance** from the Government. This means that schools continue to have staggered starts and ends to the school day, and also staggered playtimes and lunchtimes, and still operate within bubbles.
- 2.32. Where pupils are required to self-isolate, schools have been implementing their plans for the delivery of **remote education** for these few pupils. This necessarily looks different to when whole year groups were being educated remotely during the last lockdown, as class teachers continue to teach the rest of their class face to face whilst these few pupils are at home. Schools have different arrangements in place when this happens, dependent on the resources available to them at the time and on the needs of the pupils.
- 2.33. **Strong communication** with schools continues throughout this term: headteachers continue to receive a daily email, streamlining communication from council officers and they are up to speed on key government guidance. Weekly meetings continue with primary headteacher cluster representatives and secondary headteachers, and there are regular meetings with special school headteachers.
- 2.34. The School Improvement team has begun to work in a more face-to-face way with schools, where their Covid risk assessments allow, and in response to each school's needs. For schools where we have identified higher levels of risk, we have undertaken significant amounts of face-to-face support and challenge. **Support and Challenge** meetings (for identified schools) have continued uninterrupted throughout this academic year.
- 2.35. For secondary schools two particular areas have dominated activity. Schools have prepared for and implemented the **new teacher assessed** grades. Schools are now finalising these grades, for final submission by 18th June. After this, every school will be asked to provide evidence of student work to support the national moderation process, before results are finalised in preparation for publication in early August.
- 2.36. Secondary schools also continue to respond to the death of Sarah Everard and the testimonies shared by young people nationally about **sexual violence and harassment**. Responses include looking at policy and practice to ensure that young women in particular feel safe whilst in our schools.
- 2.37. All schools are continuing to focus on 'lost learning', ensuring that teaching time is used carefully to prepare pupils for the next stage or year group of their education. This has included the use of **Catch Up Premium** funding for activity to support the most disadvantaged pupils in particular.

The **Virtual School** has continued to ensure that Personal Education Plan (PEP) planning meetings for our looked after children take place. During lockdown these were again remote meetings for the most part, but are returning to face-to-face, again as schools' Covid risk assessments allow. They have continued to advocate for our children in care, through work with schools, children's services and the wider network. Attendance of children in care during lockdown (when they were allowed to continue to attend school) was again monitored carefully.

- 2.38. After a delay in the Government confirming the extension of the project funding, the Social Workers in Schools (SWIS) Pilot is now re-established with all 6 social workers recruited and heading back into school sites at Harris Morden, Merton and Wimbledon, Rutlish, Melrose and Ursuline. The new team of SWIS is providing social work assessment and intervention as well as offering preventative social work with young people in these schools.
- 2.39. The SWIS Team Manager is taking forward work to support the 6 SWIS pilot schools with their contextual safeguarding assessments and has delivered information sessions to Wimbledon College and Ursuline. These sessions are intended to raise schools awareness of contextual harms and to assist schools in the risk assessment of contextual safeguarding vulnerabilities in and associated with the school environment and community.
- 2.40. Finally, the Local Authority has been successful in a recent bid to the 'What Works Centre' to be part of an extended pilot to provide supervision for Designated Safeguarding Leads in Merton primary schools. This will involve half of primary schools being provided with supervision by a senior social worker on a regular basis across the autumn and spring terms next academic year. The What Works Centre hope they will have funding to extend the pilot into the summer term 2022.

School Organisation

School admissions, demand for school places and free school meals:

- 2.41. **School admissions** continued to operate as normal and all children were allocated a school place on the primary and secondary school national offer days. Mirroring experiences across London, there was a **significant decrease** in applications and therefore allocations for primary school places, accelerating a trend we have witnessed over the past five years. Nevertheless some schools remain heavily oversubscribed and appeals are being heard.
- 2.42. Demand for secondary places continues to be strong but will fall as lower primary numbers enter year 7 in the coming years. With the support of our secondary schools and those in Sutton we have therefore been working with the School Commissioners Office to make the case that an 8-form entry Free School in Sutton close to Rose Hill should not open.

- 2.43. After providing local authority funding in the October half term, we have now begun to use the Government's **Covid Support grant** to support schools to families with children on free school meals. Funding was used to provide supermarket vouchers for all the recent school holidays periods. We are still waiting to hear from government on the position for the forthcoming summer holidays.
- 2.44. Melrose School is now an all-through school so for the first time the council is now providing local specialist places for primary age children with Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs. A primary age class opened in September for a temporary period in part of Worsfold House (empty building adjacent to Melrose School) – the permanent building is under construction, and due to be completed by Christmas 2021.
- 2.45. **Whatley Avenue** (former Adult Education building) – a report is going to 22 June Cabinet to consult on this building providing for SEND provision for **80 children with a specialism in ASD** (Autism Spectrum Disorder) and SCLN (Speech, Communication and Language Needs). This would be managed through Melbury College and be an expansion of Melrose School.

Joint Commissioning and Partnerships

- 2.46. The Integrated Children and Young People's Commissioning team is made up of staff from Merton Children Schools and Families (CSF), SWL CCG (Merton) Children's commissioning and Merton Public Health, hosted by the Public Health Team. The multi-agency team has a joint action plan to support planning, organising and implementing the actions needed to deliver integrated high-quality and responsive services to children and families within Merton which meet the overarching strategic objectives of each organisation.
- 2.47. The integrated Community Services Contract jointly commissioned and managed between LBM and SWL CCG (Merton) has been a key focus to ensure services continue to deliver for children and families during the pandemic and responding to the redeployment of staff and prioritisation of services. The children's aspects of the contract includes the delivery of Health Visiting, School Nursing, Children's Therapies, EHCPs services as well as the adult services commissioned by SWL CCG. Due to the pandemic, extension of the contract was agree at Cabinet. Work taking place with provider to agree any changes to services and developing approach to future integrated commissioning beyond the contract extension.
- 2.48. A key focus for the Public Health and Infection Prevention Control lead in the team has been to support education, early years and CYP supported living accommodation settings to manage outbreaks, promote resilience to deal with COVID cases and providing advice and support on the latest guidance. This is working in partnership with education/CSF leads as well as wider partners across the council.

Update on the Department’s Transformation Activities

- 2.49. As part of council-wide transformation activity, the directorate is overseeing a number of transformation projects. The table below provides a high-level outline of the work, and the named lead.
- 2.50. To support the co-ordination and delivery of these transformation projects, the council has appointed programme co-ordinators. Delivery of each project is monitored by the CSF’s management team meeting, and progress updates are provided to the council’s management team meeting.

Table 1: CSF Transformation Projects – Overview

Project	Project Outline	Lead
Mosaic Repair	To oversee a programme of work to repair the existing Children’s Social Care case management system (Mosaic).	Karl Mittelstadt, Head of Performance, Policy and Partnerships
Clinical Systemic Interventions Review	To undertake a review of Merton’s in-house CAMHs and therapeutic edge of care offer, using evidence & insights to make recommendations regarding future functions and funding of this service	David Michael, Head of Children in Care & Resources
Residential Placements for Children	There is a shortage of good quality and cost-effective supported accommodation for care experienced young adults for whom LB Merton has statutory duties. There are opportunities to more effectively commission supported accommodation as well as exploring vacant and privately let domestic buildings in the school estate which might be suitable for re-purposing	David Michael, Head of Children in Care & Resources
CSC Re-organisation	Reviewing existing structures to ensure effective service delivery within existing budgets	Sue Myers, AD (Children’s Social Care and Youth Inclusion)
Family Wellbeing (Short-Breaks)	To review the approach to short breaks across the thresholds of need in accordance with stat frameworks including universally available provision. Engagement of young people, parents and carers in service re-design.	Allison Jones, Head of Early Help and Early Years
Transitions	Improve transitions from children’s services to adults’ services.	Karla Finikin, Head of SENDIS
DSG Recovery	Large scale recovery plan to reduce year on year increase of deficit and to reduce overall deficit within 5 years	Nick Wilson, AD (Education and Early Help)