

Committee: Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel

Date: 29th September 2021

Wards: All

Subject: Departmental Update

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

Lead member: Cllr Eleanor Stringer

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.

2 DETAILS

CHILDREN, SCHOOLS & FAMILIES

2.1. September is always an eventful month in Children, Schools and Families Department. After a well-deserved summer break, schools have now returned without any Covid restrictions. This is great news for children. However, we are working closely with Public Health colleagues monitor Covid data. We are also keeping a close eye on attendance rates – especially for those open to children's social care or with an EHCP.

2.2. After a competitive recruitment campaign for our permanent Assistant Directors in CSF, I am pleased to announce the appointment of Elizabeth Fitzpatrick as Assistant Director (Education and Early Help) and Dheeraj Chibber as Assistant Director (Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion).

2.3. Members of this panel will know Elizabeth from her work as Head of School Improvement. She will be starting as soon as an interim replacement can be appointed. Dheeraj joins us from Hertfordshire County Council where he was Head of Family Safeguarding and will take up post in November. I have arranged for robust hand-over processes to take place for both interim ADs.

2.4. As I look forward to the autumn and winter months, we already have planned our Annual Engagement Meeting with Ofsted in November. This

will be an opportunity for us to appraise Ofsted on our improvements since their last full inspection back in 2018.

- 2.5. I would like to end with some really positive news. On the 26th August, the HM Inspectorate of Probation published our Youth Justice Service inspection report. The service was found to be 'Outstanding' in seven out of 12 areas surveyed, with four deemed 'Good'. The excellent work of the Youth Justice Service and the Youth Crime Prevention Executive Board and the difference they make to children and young people's lives in Merton were rightly recognised and endorsed through this inspection.

Supporting Vulnerable Children

Supporting Children & Young People with Special Educational Needs

- 2.6. The Education directorate is currently reviewing the SEN Support offer and a focus for this academic year is the graduated response (assess, plan, do, review) process. The review of how mainstream maintained schools and academies are meeting the Special Educational Needs of their pupils and utilising their notional funding will support the directorate in understanding further the reasons for the continued demand in referrals for statutory assessment.
- 2.7. Demand for statutory assessments has continued. At the end of August, the total number of EHCPs was 2476.
- 2.8. 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) for issuing plans within 20 weeks was 63% at the end of August.
- 2.9. We monitor our 20 week timeliness on a monthly basis and saw an improvement in August where 79% of EHCPs were issued within 20 weeks.
- 2.10. The improvement in meeting timescales is as a result of our continued work with partners to improve processes for receiving professional advice within the 6 week statutory timescale.

DfE Safety Valve Programme

- 2.11. As members will be aware from the recent strategic council report, the DfE have invited Merton to participate in the second round of their 'safety valve' intervention programme with the aim of agreeing a package of reform to the high needs system that will bring the DSG deficit under control.
- 2.12. This will start next week, with a meeting involving senior officers, when the local authority will set out our perspective on and reasons for the deficit position, and the particular challenges within the local authority. The department's team will ask questions and introduce their initial lines of enquiry based on a rigorous review of the data.

- 2.13. Over the autumn, the department's team will then work closely with the local authority to challenge and support the development of the DSG management plan through detailed discussions. During this process, the local authority will be working towards submitting a proposal to the department setting out:
- How the authority will go about reaching an in-year balance on the DSG, and the timeframe for achieving this;
 - How the authority will itself reduce the historic cumulative deficit, and what support might be required from the department to eliminate the deficit in full.
- 2.14. Final proposals will be submitted to the department in early December. The negotiation teams will assess the proposals and determine whether they secure the sustainability of the authority's high needs systems and spending appropriately and quickly, and whether any request for support represents value for taxpayer money.
- 2.15. The final decision on whether to enter into an agreement with any authority lies with the Secretary of State.
- 2.16. If the authority's proposals are agreed to by the Secretary of State, they will form the basis of a published agreement. The agreement will require the authority to implement reforms to the agreed timetable, alongside maintaining an agreed savings profile.
- 2.17. It will also set out additional funding which the department will release to support the reduction of your cumulative deficit and any potential resources required from LBM.
- 2.18. The authority's progress against the agreement will subsequently be monitored by the department, and will determine the release of further funding.

Children's Social Care – General Update

- 2.19. As part of our continuous improvement work, we regularly review the impact of our social work on Merton children and families. Senior leaders in Children Social Care have a good sense of our strengths, including:
- Permanent senior managers who know their service well and have a grip on practice
 - Effective relationships with partner agencies who take a shared approach to delivering key services in Merton
 - A wide range of Early Help services designed to prevent the need for statutory intervention
 - Effective 'front door' arrangements that continue to manage contacts and referrals into the service well. A recent Ofsted focused visit highlighted the strong practice in the hub and first response teams
 - Reducing numbers of children with CP plans

- A highly effective Youth Justice Service recently judged to be good with many outstanding features (August 21)
- Timely good quality practice with children who are involved in the public law framework
- Successful social workers in schools' programme exploring better ways to support children
- Good outcomes for children who are adopted or achieve permanence through SGO arrangements
- Good results in the retention and recruitment of foster carers so that we can keep our looked after children close to home.
- Development of the Mockingbird Programme to further support our carers.
- Stable placements for our looked after children
- Effective support from the virtual school for our children

2.20. However, we also know the areas we need to be focussing on, and have clear plans in place to address any weaknesses, including:

- We need to be able to better evidence the impact of our early help service
- Written plans and records do not always reflect the good work which takes place with children and families
- There has been a lot of activity around improving contextual safeguarding but we need to improve our systems and processes so that we can better record and monitor our responses more effectively and understand and report on outcomes for children
- Commissioning arrangements for placements for children with complex needs is underdeveloped. We need to work with partners to improve this.

Case loads in children's social care

2.21. Our average caseloads have reduced a little and are now within acceptable limits. Cases are not distributed evenly across all teams however and some social workers have higher case allocations.

2.22. Our case allocation is reviewed weekly, and we are trying to reduce the impact on teams through extra support and management oversight.

2.23. Recruiting social workers is difficult both in the region and nationally.

2.24. As part of our longer-term strategy to grow and develop our own workers, we have a high number of trainee social workers and newly qualified workers who need to have smaller caseloads.

2.25. The introduction of a combined front door means that we may be able to divert some cases into our targeted Early Help service. We are hoping this

will also contribute to a reduction in the workload of our First Response services.

Youth Justice Service – Inspection Feedback

- 2.26. In August, we received inspection feedback from HM Inspectorates of Probation (HMIP) following the inspection of Merton's Youth Justice Service in May. Merton's overall rating was 'good', with many practice areas achieving 'outstanding'.
- 2.27. The inspectorate found the work of our services to be of a high standard, highlighting that:
- There is a clear vision, which is well communicated across the partnership, and the YJS board is well attended. Board members advocate for YJS children and have sufficient seniority to make decisions and commit resources from their own agencies.
 - The workforce has a range of skills, knowledge and experience to develop trusting and supportive relationships with children
 - Quality assurance processes are used well, enabling a reflective and considered approach to the management of complex cases.
 - The case management of court disposals was of a high standard, supported by strong and purposeful management oversight
 - Assessment was rated as 'Outstanding' and was based on a wide range of sources and detailed information. We saw thorough and balanced analysis of factors to support desistance, address safety and wellbeing, and understand the risk of harm to others.
 - Planning, implementation and review were 'Outstanding', with strong evidence of effective partnership work and individualised responses to children and their families.
 - The joint work associated with out-of-court disposals was 'Outstanding', underpinned by a joint decision-making panel and a clear protocol with relevant stakeholders. Assessment work was 'Outstanding'. It was strengths-based, which helped staff to develop effective working relationships with children and families. Planning and implementation were 'Outstanding' for desistance work in all cases, and good in work to address safety and wellbeing and the risk of harm to others.
- 2.28. Inspectors suggested that the quality of our service could improve through further developing the use of data to inform longer-term planning, to better identify trends and connections, and to evidence the ongoing impact of its work. The management team have already acted on this recommendation, and have strengthened analytical capacity.

Speech and language update (scrutiny request)

- 2.29. Across the multi-agency Early Years sector, there is a strong evidence base that shows the importance of babies and children communication, language and speech, from pregnancy to the age of 5. As part of our

recovery from the Covid pandemic and associated periods of lock-down, we are paying particular attention to the early identification of speech and language needs.

- 2.30. In Merton all families have access to the Heath Visiting Service which is run by Central London Community Health (CLCH) who deliver the Healthy Child Programme. The Healthy Child Programme (HCP) is led by health visitors in collaboration with other health professionals. This is a universal offer with additional services for families needing extra support, whether short-term intervention or ongoing help for complex longer-term needs.
- 2.31. The programme comprises of health promotion, child health surveillance and screening. It provides a range of services to families, including, health and development reviews to support early identification of communication, speech and language, advice and support to help children's physical and emotional development. The programme can ensure families receive early help before problems develop further, which in turn reduces demand on higher cost specialist services.
- 2.32. In Merton, our HCP is delivered via our Children's Centres through co-location of staff and the delivery of health clinics. This approach facilitates partnership collaboration and a shared understanding of the needs of families and children in Merton, as well as supporting ease of access to programmes across our Children's Centres, supporting early communication, speech and language. All first time parents (and parents who may require additional support) have access to a 5 week programme designed upon the principles of 5 to Thrive¹, providing an evidenced based approach to supporting parents to talk, play, relax, respond, engage in the very early days of their babies life to support wellbeing and healthy child development.
- 2.33. If a child is identified at 2 year health review as having some speech and language delay then they are invited to return to the health visitor after three months but in the meantime can be booked into a toddler programme at a Centre for further observation and 'assessment' of need. They could also be booked into a more specialist Social Communication group if the needs are more apparent, and follow on referral to the CLCH Speech and Language service may also be made.
- 2.34. There are a range of programmes for children up until the age of 3 and a half, delivered through the Centres, that support children's communication, with parents and children together. There are also a range of more targeted programmes for parents where there may be additional needs identified including specialist services for children with SEND.
- 2.35. Where children's communication and language is of a more significant concern, often highlighted by the health visitor or children centre staff, the early years service have Family Support Workers who are able to support parents by co-ordinating services for children, including making referrals and arranging for children to be seen by speech and language therapists

¹ See <https://fivetothrive.org.uk/>

and community paediatricians. Children are also invited to weekly stay and play groups within children's centres, to support their social communication. Family Support Workers carry out regular home visits, offering advice so that parents can support their child's communication within the home. The early years' service also offers a parenting course called Incredible Years ASD/language delay, which is an 11 week course designed to support parents to engage their child in play that can support their child's communication and to help them with strategies around routines and behaviour.

- 2.36. The early years' service provides a brokerage service to encourage take up of 2 year funded early education, which is free nursery education for children meeting certain eligibility criteria who may be more vulnerable to not meeting expected outcomes. Supporting families to take up a funded 2 year old places, is key to our work in under 5s as evidence shows take up in good quality settings, has an ongoing positive impact on children's outcomes throughout school.
- 2.37. There are a team of Early Years Advisors who work in partnership with the range of early years providers and they deliver whole setting advice that supports children's speech and language, through on site visits and training programmes, as well as working with settings to plan individual support for children when needs may be identified. Support is given to parents where children with identified SEND are transitioning into an educational setting or school.
- 2.38. Once a child has started early years education, the early years' service provides inclusion officers who support practitioners and SENCO's to put effective SEND Support in place. This includes advise around effective strategies and interventions that will be beneficial for the child, supporting practitioners to co-ordinate services for the child such as extra support in the setting, referrals to speech and language therapists, physiotherapists and community paediatricians, so children's needs can be assessed. These professionals, along with Educational Psychologists, are available to provide services for the child, if they are deemed to need them, even if there is no EHCP in place.

Supporting Families

Children's Social Care – re-organisation

- 2.39. The restructure has now been fully completed. This has been a complex piece of work involving the whole directorate. Communication was made more difficult because of remote working but by listening carefully to staff and keeping them informed at each step, speaking to unions and colleagues in HR, we have successfully delivered the plan on time.
- 2.40. All assimilated roles are now in place, we have completed internal interviews and appointments. All other/external vacancies are now out to advert and interviews are taking place over the next few weeks.

- 2.41. The task now is to settle staff and teams into the new working arrangements and to focus on continuing to improve our practice to achieve better outcomes for children. We need to ensure our staff have the right skills and support from managers to do their job well.
- 2.42. Recruiting and retaining social workers remains a challenge both locally and nationally. Merton is responding to this by advertising nationally, further developing our frontline teams(8 new social work students started last week with us) and supporting and encouraging our ASYE staff to stay with us.

Improved front door arrangements

- 2.43. The 'Children and Family Hub' went live on 27th September. The hub functions as a combined front door for both Children's Social Care and Early Help services – those overseen by the council (the 'Family and Wellbeing Service') as well as universal Early Help services in the community.
- 2.44. The transition from from previous arrangements has been smooth. A pilot phase enabled us to learn and adapt the model prior to go-live. This was supported by regular meetings between colleagues in Children's Social Care and the Family Wellbeing service.
- 2.45. As part of introduction of the Children and Family Hub we have introduced a new 'Request for Service' form. This process enables our partners agencies to seek council input more effectively – ensuring that children receive a timely and proportionate response to their need.
- 2.46. The introduction of the hub brings to an end an extensive piece of work with our partners. We are now supporting the go-live date with an extensive training programme for our own staff as well as partner agencies

Supporting Schools

Race Equality in schools

- 2.47. Merton schools continue to work in partnership to address issues of race equality, particularly following the death of George Floyd and other sad events last year, and the Black Lives Matter movement. The forum continues to meet on a twice termly basis. Activity within the forum has included:
- overseeing the refreshing of the strategy for Merton schools to address race equality;
 - examining the most recent data we have available for Merton schools, to inform actions for the coming academic year;
 - hearing from inspirational external speakers to keep our focus fresh and to ensure we continue to use external perspectives to challenge our thinking;
 - reviewing the impact of activity last year

2.48. A conference for school staff was held in June. This was a very successful event, held virtually and attended by over 50 delegates from across Merton schools. Evaluations of the key note speakers and of the workshops was positive. Professor Steve Strand spoke about 'Race, sex, class and educational achievement at age 16'; the author and broadcaster Afua Hirsch spoke about her experiences of racism and equality, as someone who attended Merton schools, and was brought up locally; and we had workshops on:

- Raising the achievement of Black Caribbean pupils: Good practice (Professor Feyisa Demi, Honorary Professor, School of Education, Durham University)
- Building confidence for discussing race, racism and anti-racism, using a shared language (The Merton EPS)
- Decolonising the curriculum and pedagogy (Sabrina Edwards, Director of Educating for Equality)
- A call to action: What are your next steps on your anti-racism journey? (The Merton EPS)
- Improving inclusion through partnership with parents (Keith Shipman, Social Inclusion Manager and Inclusion Team, Merton Council)

Schools' action to address climate change

2.49. Working in collaboration with the Council's Climate Action Group, a conference will be held for school leaders at the end of September to help focus schools on the action they can take to address climate change with and through their pupils. The conference will alert schools to the Council's 2030 net-zero carbon emissions target, and challenge them (through the 'Let's Go Zero' campaign for schools) to take action themselves. Schools will hear about local best practice; how to address these issues through the curriculum; hints and tips on how to save energy and water in school; and how to promote active travel to school

Schools' return in September

2.50. Schools returned for the new academic year from 1st September. This was the first time that they have operated under revised and reduced measures to manage Covid, since the introduction of 'Stage 4' (in July). The only measures that schools are now required to implement for 'business as usual' cover the ventilation of spaces; enhanced cleaning regimes; and hand washing/sanitisation. Bubbles are no longer required, and children under the ages of 18 years and 6 months (as well as people who have received their two Covid vaccinations) are not required to self-isolate if they are in contact with a positive case. In addition, schools no longer have a formal role to play in 'Track and Trace' when a positive case is identified in the school community.

2.51. The start of term seems to have been relatively smooth for most schools, though the number of cases in schools has risen slightly over the past

week, with some schools experiencing an outbreak (now defined as five positive cases who have been in contact with each other). Where outbreaks have been identified colleagues in Public Health have been providing advice and guidance to leaders. So far the types of additional measures needed to be implemented have been minor; in the very small number of schools where there have been larger numbers of cases, measures have included the temporary reintroduction of limited mixing between classes, staggered lunches and the use of face masks.

- 2.52. Secondary schools implemented two on site tests for all pupils. This too seems to have gone smoothly, with only a limited number of positive cases being found through this exercise.
- 2.53. Schools are now being funded to employ 'Covid Resilience Champions' from this September, who will be key conduits of information between Public Health and schools, and help infection prevention and control measures to be embedded across schools.
- 2.54. The challenge now for schools with secondary age pupils is the implementation of the vaccination programme for 12-15 year olds. The Council is working closely with the CCG and the agency responsible for the programme roll out (Hounslow and Richmond Community Healthcare Trust) to try to ensure this happens the minimum disruption for schools. It will nevertheless be a big undertaking for schools, at a time when they are trying to get back to some semblance of 'normality'.