

Committee: Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel

Date: 12 January 2022

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.

2 DETAILS

CHILDREN, SCHOOLS & FAMILIES

- 2.1. At the time of writing this update, it has been a very busy period for the directorate. We have been working throughout the Autumn Term with advisers from the DfE on our DSG Recovery Plan and prior to Christmas submitted our final plan for review. We are hoping to reach an agreement that with our plan and support from the DfE we will eliminate both the in-year and historic deficit within five years.
- 2.2. We have been operating in the context of rising Covid numbers with the biggest rise in cases recorded for school-age children. This has put pressure on our schools and so we have been working with head teachers and colleagues from Public Health to provide advice and support when needed. We have also stepped up internal processes to ensure we are able to respond promptly including regular meetings to co-ordinate activities across the directorate. As part of this process, we keep under review staffing levels and contingency planning to ensure we can continue to operate safely.
- 2.3. In November, Ofsted inspectors came to Merton to meet with the Senior Leadership Team in CSF for our 'Annual Conversation'. The discussion covered all aspects of children's social care as well as work with schools and settings. We were able to share our self-assessment of areas working

well and those we are working to improve as well as some innovative projects we are implementing such as Mocking bird and Social Worker in Schools.

- 2.4. In December there was significant media coverage of the horrific murders of six year-old Arthur Lobinjo-Hughes and 16 month old Star Hobson at the hands of their carers. People were shocked, angered and saddened by the awful circumstances of these murders. For our social work teams and for all staff across the system who work to safeguard children, we look even more closely at these tragedies and reflect on our own work with children and young people. We will pay close attention to the National Child Safeguarding Practice Review into the lessons that can be learnt. I am particularly grateful to those members of staff who worked throughout the holiday season to ensure the most vulnerable members of our society were safe and protected.
- 2.5. To gauge the impact of the pandemic on young people we undertook a large-scale youth voice survey between May and November 2021. With support from Rutlish School we commissioned a schools based, young people led survey, to which over 2000 young people replied. Our Young Inspectors working with Partnership for Young London then spoke to over 200 young people in targeted focus groups. The findings were presented to the Youth Parliament who in turn took recommendations to the The Children's Trust Board in December. These recommendations will inform planning and delivery of services and Young Inspectors will work with officers to monitor the impact of this work.

Supporting Vulnerable Children

Supporting Children & Young People with Special Educational Needs

- 2.6. Demand for statutory assessments continues. The total number of EHCPs at the end of November was 2505. The SEN Management Team are working with particular schools who have identified high numbers of pupils they were planning to refer for an assessment. These meetings include the Head of SEND, Principal Educational Psychologist and the Children's Health Commissioner. This has seen an improvement in the schools understanding of how to access health pathways and to identify whether a referral for an assessment is required or whether further interventions should be implemented at SEN Support level.
- 2.7. There is a continued improvement in meeting the statutory timescales of issuing new EHCPs within 20 weeks. The Merton year to date average in issuing first plans (including exceptions) stands as 69% which is above the national average.
- 2.8. Together with health partners, the Local Authority continues to respond to the recommendations made following the SEND Area Inspection in June 2019. Weekly meetings, chaired by the Director of CSF and attended by Senior Leaders in the CCG have meant a greater degree of strategic oversight and co-ordination of improvement activities.

- 2.9. As part of the improvement requirements arising from the inspection, there have been regular progress reviews with representatives from the DfE and NHS England. Feedback from the most recent review meeting was positive. Re-visits normally take place within two years of the original visit. A re-inspection is therefore expected in the near future.
- 2.10. As members will be aware from previous updates, Merton was invited to participate in the second round of the DfE's '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.
- 2.11. The initial part of the process has now concluded, and Merton has been recommended for formal inclusion in the programme. A proposed recovery plan has been submitted to the Secretary of State for Education, and a ministerial decision is expected early in the New Year. Inclusion in the programme would mean that the DfE would contribute to the clearing of our historical DSG debt, on condition of the successful delivery of an ambitious plan to address the factors underlying the deficit.
- 2.12. The recruitment of additional officers in the SENDIS service has started, to enable the caseloads of EHCP coordinators to be reduced to a more manageable level, and to improve input to and oversight of the EHCP review process.
- 2.13. In September, Cabinet agreed the additional provision of 80 places at Whatley Avenue, primarily for children with autistic spectrum disorder, under the auspices of Melrose School. Work is progressing well to undertake the building works and to place the first cohort of children into the provision in September 2022. Officers are also in the advanced stage of negotiating expanded resourced provision for children with ASD at two primary schools.
- 2.14. The need for further expansion has been discussed with the DfE as part of the safety valve discussions and details on how and when to submit a capital bid to fund expansion has been received.
- 2.15. In September, Cabinet also agreed to move Merton Medical Services into the Lavender Nursery building, with Lavender Nursery moving to Steers Mead. This requires a chain of projects to adapt Steers Mead and Bond Road Centre and these projects are planned and commencing with Merton Medical Services starting to use part of the Lavender building in a secure area in February.

Our Response to Contextual Risk

- 2.16. As part of our ongoing 'contextual harm project' (in partnership with the University of Bedfordshire) safety planning processes have been aligned to statutory safeguarding processes. This work is underpinned by increased consultation and advice to both internal professionals and external partners. Further work is taking place to promote the young person's voice and involvement in the development of the approach.

- 2.17. Since introducing a specialist 'Independent Reviewing Officer' (IRO) with a focus on ensuring plans address extra-familial harm, a small number of reviews have been commenced with specific children to pilot the approach. Operational responses have been strengthened by replacing the Multi-Agency Risk and Vulnerability Panel (MARVE) processes with a 'Missing and Child Exploitation' (MACE) panel, this commenced last month and reports to the Promote and Protect Young People (PPYP) panel. We continue to strengthen and share information with our neighbouring Local Authorities when addressing children and young people at the highest risk of extra-familial harm and identification of common themes and locations. Within the MACE meetings, we have strengthened the partnerships with key partners to promote and share wider planning and interventions for Merton young people and the community.
- 2.18. Strategically, the MSCP 'Promote and Protect Young People' sub-group has strengthened its overview processes and now receives regular quantitative and qualitative information. During 2021, the PPYP launched the multi-agency Contextual Safeguarding Strategy and Action Plan, which outlines the current actions we are taking to expand our response to safeguard young people from risks outside of their family home. The action plan is reviewed in MACE meetings.

Social Workers in Schools

- 2.19. We secured DfE funding in the summer of 2020 for a Social Workers in Schools pilot. We were able to fund six social workers attached to six secondary schools. Support for children and families is two-fold with: preventative work aimed at identifying emerging problems early; and statutory work in individual schools with up to 12 children for each social worker. To date 149 children and young people (74 families) have been supported within statutory interventions. We are exploring the sustainability of this work when central funding comes to an end in the summer of 2022.

Introducing a new Practice Model

- 2.20. Following a consultation with staff in the summer we have refreshed our practice model in Merton. This is now an updated blended approach with relationship based practice at its heart. The model retains the best of what was previously in place including systemic theories and Signs of Safety whilst also acknowledging the importance of trauma informed and restorative approaches and the skills and tools that practitioners already possess. Throughout December 2021 and January 2022, we are rolling out staff training with a view to embed the new relationship-based model and to achieve positive outcomes for children and young people.

Supporting Care Leavers into Work and Employment

- 2.21. As a service, we have focussed on increasing opportunities for children in our care and care experienced young people to access employment and training opportunities with the council. We have promoted the Government's 'Kick start' programme and organised a specific event for

our young people in November. At the time of writing, this has unfortunately not yet translated in young people taking up the offer.

- 2.22. As part of wider efforts to enable better access to employment and training, two of our care experienced young people successfully applied for internships in Central Government departments and will be taking up these posts in the new year.

Early Help Summit

- 2.23. In November, the Merton Safeguarding Children Partnership (MSCP) hosted an 'Early Help Summit'. The summit was an opportunity to publicise the MSCP's Early Help Strategy and Effective Support for Families Model, which were launched earlier this year. Chaired by the Independent Chair Aileen Buckton, the summit was attended by over 50 practitioners and practice managers from across statutory and voluntary agencies working with Merton families.
- 2.24. There were a range of internal and external speakers including: Dr. Sarah Ivankovic, Head of Barnardo's, London and Sarah Keen from SW London CCG. Sally Hogg from the Parent-Infant Foundation provided useful input on a range of topics including the Department for Education funded 'See, Hear, Respond' programme which aimed to identify and respond to hidden needs during the pandemic, the importance of a child's early years and efforts to ensure school attendance during and post-pandemic.

Supporting Families

Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme

- 2.25. The Government's Household Support Grant, a temporary grant from government to cover the period up to 31 March 2022, has enabled the council to support schools to provide £15 worth of supermarket vouchers per week for each child who gets benefits-related free school meals for the 2021 October half term, Christmas holidays, February half term and Easter holidays 2022.
- 2.26. Over the Winter School Holiday we delivered our second Holidays Activities and Food Programme. Thirteen local voluntary sector providers were funded to offer 300 places to young people on free school meals in Merton. Part of the delivery of this provision was affected by Covid. All providers were supported to risk assess with advice and support from Public Health. Some chose to amend their programme and avoid larger gatherings for example. Planned visits to the Polka Theatre were cancelled due to an outbreak in the cast but the theatre still supported with workshops. One provision shut in the second week as the majority of staff tested positive. Another provision was unable to be delivered to a specific group of young people as there was a Covid outbreak where they collectively live. That organisation went on to deliver to a newly recruited cohort.

- 2.27. All thirteen organisations delivered to children and young people – albeit in some cases to a lower referral number as parents were cautious or children had tested positive. Children enjoyed good food, lots of physical exercise and enriching activities, and there was provision across the two weeks.

Transport Consultation

- 2.28. The council undertook an online consultation on home to school travel from December from 6 November to 4 January 2021. The consultation was undertaken using a number of channels as follows:

- An on-line survey;
- Two webinars for parents organised in partnership with Kids First (the independent forum for parents of children and young people with disabilities or special needs)
- Visits to three schools where we transport the most children (Perseid, Cricket Green and the Raynes Park ASD provision) to discuss with staff and pupils their experiences

An update on the outcome will be provided at a future Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel.

Supporting Schools

Ofsted Update

- 2.29. There have been four schools inspected during the autumn term 2021. These were in the order anticipated by Merton School Improvement and the two published reports match the MEP Inspectors' evaluations and the impact of MEP support over the last academic year. Both Links primary and The Priory CE primary schools have sustained their previous 'good' judgements; The Priory will expect a full (Section 5) inspection in academic year 2022 – 2023.
- 2.30. There could be ten further inspections in spring 2022 and MSI inspectors and advisers have been preparing schools for these through their routine MEP visits and additional support and challenge. Advice has included 'Deep Dive' and 'Single Conversation' preparation with senior and middle leaders and headteachers' sharing of inspectors' questions after a local inspection.
- 2.31. Ofsted has been allocated additional funding which will allow an acceleration of its inspection programme from September 2022 and it is aiming to have inspected every school once between September 2021 and the summer of 2025. Good schools can therefore now expect an inspection approximately 5 years after their last inspection.
- 2.32. Previously exempt outstanding schools are now also being inspected and Merton has six outstanding maintained primary and secondary schools last inspected before September 2015 and three last inspected between 2016 and 2019. The timing of their previous inspection indicates the framework

under which they will next be inspected, with those inspected before 2015 receiving a Section 5 inspection, and those inspected after that date more likely to receive a Section 8 inspection.

Black Lives Matter & the Schools Equalities Forum

- 2.33. Pupil ambassadors of black and other minority ethnic backgrounds, representing all but two Merton secondary schools, contributed to the Merton Schools' Conference on Racism on 17th November 2021. They reflected on their own lived experiences of racism in schools and were involved in describing the school they want for pupils new to Year 7 this academic year and what actions and commitments that requires from themselves and from the education community. With support from the conference leaders, the ambassadors have prepared a manifesto in three parts: accountability, celebration and how we can move forward. This will be presented to the schools' Black Lives Matter and Equalities Forum on 20th January 2022.
- 2.34. The pupil ambassadors will sustain the conference momentum through regular meetings with the conference organisers.

Covid – Impact on and response from Merton Schools

- 2.35. On the last day of autumn term 2021 there were outbreaks in education settings in Merton, affecting six of nine secondary schools and 36 of 44 primary schools. All mainstream schools remained open to face to face education, but the 'red' Covid measures required in all three special schools (as advised by Public Health) resulted in remote education for these pupils at the very end of term.
- 2.36. Throughout December, headteachers faced many challenges linked to the ongoing pandemic, including high levels of staff absence, and the isolation requirements relating to unvaccinated staff who were close contacts of an infected person. This meant leaders constantly needed to contingency plan in order to have a teacher in every class. This was further hampered by very few supply teachers being available (a situation faced by schools across London, if not nationally).
- 2.37. School communities, including parents, had looked forward to children having the experience of Christmas performances which were missed last year, but these could not all proceed because of the high rates of infections, and as schools carried out their risk assessments, again with the support of Merton Public Health.
- 2.38. Prior to the return of schools after the Christmas break, the Government announced that face masks are to be worn in classrooms in England's secondary schools to reduce the spread of the Omicron variant. The temporary reintroduction of face coverings aims to address concerns about schools remaining open for face-to-face learning this coming term.
- 2.39. We continue to monitor the attendance of pupils in all schools, and in particular the attendance of vulnerable pupils (those with an EHCP and/or a social worker). Where these vulnerable pupils are absent we have

requested schools to notify and work with social workers and the wider network, to ensure that the appropriate safeguards are in place.

- 2.40. Schools were supported by CSF teams in a range of formats in the autumn term including: weekly meeting with primary, secondary and special headteachers or their cluster representatives; weekly emails which were stepped up to daily in the week commencing 13th December 2021. These emails to all headteachers included local and national updates from Public Health and the DfE.