

Committee: Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel

Date: 09 February 2022

Wards: All

Subject: Departmental Update

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

Lead member: Cllr Eleanor Stringer Joint Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children and Education.

Contact officer: Karl Mittelstadt, Head of Performance, Improvement 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. This update follows very shortly after our last update provided for the January meeting. I have therefore parted from the usual format to focus on a small number of updates that will be of particular interest to members of the panel and those areas members of the panel requested an update on at the last meeting.

Survey of Children and Young People

2.2. As part of understanding the impact of Covid-19 and subsequent lockdowns on children and young people, the local authority commissioned a school-based survey delivered in partnership with Merton schools and led by Rutlish School.

2.3. The survey and focus groups research was co-produced with Merton's Young Inspectors, who contributed to the project's steering group and worked with our commissioned partner 'Partnership for Young London' to design and deliver the research.

2.4. The survey reached 2,073 children and young people from 42 different schools in Merton. This was supplemented by in-depth interviews and focus groups, which reached over 200 children and young people across the borough. A total of 13 interviews and 27 focus groups were conducted lasting a total of 13.3 hours.

- 2.5. The young resident's survey and focus groups were developed alongside the [Your Merton](#) consultation to ensure the voices of children and young people are heard and inform the Council's priorities set out in the Merton 2030 plan.
- 2.6. The six outcome areas of Merton's Children and Young People Plan 2019-23 were used as a framework for the research:
- **Being Healthy** – the impact of Covid-19 on mental health and wellbeing, and exercise
 - **Staying Safe** – feeling safe in Merton and the impact of Covid-19 on feelings of safety
 - **Enjoying and achieving** – the experience of learning through Covid-19 and the impact of Covid-19 on hobbies and leisure
 - **Getting involved, having a say** – the impact of Covid-19 on engaging with community/faith groups and other settings
 - **Becoming independent** – the impact of Covid-19 on feelings about the future, and the relationship with parents
 - **My Merton** – the impact of Covid-19 on friendships and leisure time
- 2.7. Merton's Young Inspectors also worked alongside Partnership for Young London to analyse the quantitative and qualitative data and produce a final report of the findings (shared with papers). To ensure that the findings can be shared in various and accessible ways, the Young Inspectors produced a video which summarises key findings.
- 2.8. The findings from this important survey will inform the work of the Children's Trust in 2022/23. A detailed action plan is being developed, and will be considered and agreed in February.
- 2.9. A number of actions are already in motion in response to the findings, including:
- Strengthening the involvement of children and young people in strategic decision-making. Membership of the Children's Trust has been extended to include representatives from the Youth Parliament. This complements existing involvement of Young Inspectors
 - Merton's Children's in Care Council ('Our Voice') has now formally been established, and works directly with Merton's Corporate Parenting Panel
 - The findings from the survey about young people's experiences of stop and search will inform existing work to address disproportionality in the youth justice system.
 - We have set aside a small amount of money to support the delivery of responses to these findings. Importantly, the process for deciding how this money is spent will be led by children and young people and will be part of the Children's Trust's work plan

- Findings from this survey are being used to inform existing work (led by Public Health and the Local Authority) to develop a model of a young people's health hub.

Transport Consultation

- 2.10. The council undertook an online consultation on home to school travel from December from 6 November to 4 January 2021. Findings from this consultation are presented at today's meeting in a spate paper, including a summary of the number of children currently transported by destination.

Schools Update

- 2.11. There has been one inspection – of Joseph Hood Primary school – in January 2022. The report has not yet been published. At the start of the spring term 2022, Ofsted temporarily halted the use of those part time inspectors who are also front-line leaders because of the significant rise in Omicron infections and outbreaks in schools and the consequent pressures of staffing absences. It is possible that this led to some temporary postponement of scheduled inspections. The resumption of inspection teams including part-time inspectors begins from Monday 31 January 2022. Schools have been reminded that Ofsted's deferral policy - with regard to schools and settings that have been significantly impacted by staff absence in recent weeks – remains in place until spring half term.
- 2.12. The School Improvement Team have continued to prepare headteachers for their 'preparatory' conversation with the lead Inspector, the afternoon before the inspection and subject leaders who will be similarly involved in conversations about the Quality of Education when the inspection begins.
- 2.13. Schools saw high levels of infections at the end of the autumn term 2022 with 35 outbreaks on green and amber measures in the last week of term. At the beginning of the spring term 2022, pupil attendance and staff absences were both equally affected by infections, self-isolation requirements and families waiting for a negative PCR before they could travel back to the UK from holidays and long-awaited visits to family abroad. The availability of agency supply staff was and remains in extremely short supply and staff, headteachers and Governing Bodies are facing budget pressures because of the increased use of agency cover. Most secondary schools began the new term with a phased return for pupils while the on-site testing programme was rolled out; most schools prioritised Y11 and Y13 for earliest return whilst other year groups may have had remote teaching. In the final week of January 2022, infections levels continued to be high. A very small minority of schools had no option but to introduce contingency measures which included remote teaching of a year group, amalgamating classes or returning to a version of 'bubbling' because of insufficient staffing and/or as part of their amber measures.

Black Lives Matter & Young People's Race Equality Conference

- 2.14. The Black Lives Matter and Equalities Forum met on 20th January 2022. The agenda included a presentation by Patrick Cozier – Headteacher Highgate Wood School, Haringey – entitled “Making the Uncomfortable feel less Uncomfortable.” He talked about his own lived experience and how he used that to prepare his staff for managing uncomfortable conversations with students about systematised racism and racist incidents. He also gave examples of the areas of school life in which he has set targets to reduce inequalities and right injustices caused by unconscious bias.
- 2.15. At the next meeting, those Merton students involved in planning for the Young People’s Conference will present the Manifesto and will summarise the experiences and outcomes from the conference.

School Place Strategy – Update

Primary schools:

- 2.16. As reported to this committee on 29 September 2021, the broad strategy to manage falling rolls is as follows:
- Continue to encourage schools to reduce admissions numbers to multiples of 30 for education efficiency when practical to do so
 - Encourage schools to work in cluster areas with the council to agree reductions in admission numbers at an area level
 - Consider use of compatible alternative uses for space where appropriate such as primary age SEND Additional Resourced Provision when it can be agreed with schools
 - Where appropriate consider alternative models to operate schools for school improvement and to manage a balanced budget e.g. hard and soft federations
 - No plans to close schools
- 2.17. Officers have held a series of meetings with schools including at cluster level and some further admission number reductions are planned. Applications to the Schools Adjudicator have been made to reduce the admission number for three further schools for September 2022 – Bond, SS Peter and Paul RC, and The Priory CE Primary schools. We expect to hear the outcome shortly. Some further schools are considering reductions depending on the outcome of the current round of admissions. Although the closing date was 15 January for September 2022 entry, it is not until mid-February that the information is available, including from other council areas.
- 2.18. Officers are working with a number of schools with surplus places and where there is stable leadership to consider Additional Resourced Provisions (ARPs) for SEND children. West Wimbledon Primary School will be increasing the size of their ARP for September 2022.

Secondary schools:

- 2.19. The demand for secondary school Year 7 places for September 2022 remains strong. Although there was a small decrease in the number of resident applications, reflected by the Year 7 cohort in Merton primary schools being 57 lower this year, we received 182 additional first preference applications for Merton secondary schools, showing a very pleasing move to more top preferences being for Merton schools. National offer day for secondary schools is 1 March 2022 and we expect to see the position to be similar to last year, with a small surplus of places by September.
- 2.20. Officers have entered discussions with secondary headteachers regarding future reductions in admissions numbers but the position of the schools is currently to delay any planned changes until the specific school impact is clear.
- 2.21. Under the School Admissions Code, schools only have a fixed admissions number for Year 7 and are able to work to a different number in higher year groups. Similar to many of our neighbouring borough areas, all secondary schools in Merton are at maximum capacity in all year groups. However, we have procedures through the fair access protocol that ensures that all Merton resident children out of education are placed in our schools without undue delay. All Merton schools have signed up to this protocol and work to support it. There are also procedures in place via the protocol to consider any vulnerable pupils that have a significant need to move from their current school to an alternative one.

School admissions consultations for 2023 entry

- 2.22. Glenthorne High School and Harris Academy Wimbledon have consulted on revised admissions arrangements that the council has objected to. In the case of Glenthorne, this is to add priority for children attending Aragon and Abbey Primary Schools to an already complicated admissions policy that includes banding. In the case of Harris Academy Wimbledon the intention is to select 10% of its intake on the basis of music aptitude.
- 2.23. The two schools' as admissions authorities will need to decide whether to proceed with their proposals; if so the council is able to object to the Office of the Schools Adjudicator, the national arbitrator on fair school admissions policies. Officers have had a positive meeting with the Headteacher of Glenthorne High School.

Supporting vulnerable Children and with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities

- 2.24. Demand for statutory assessments continues. The total number of EHCPs at the end of December was 2514. 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.
- 2.25. 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. 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 shortly. 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.

Additional SEND provision at Whatley Avenue

- 2.26. At the time of this committee meeting we expect to be out to tender for the works to adapt Whatley Avenue into a good quality provision for children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and other communication needs under the management of Melrose School. Works are therefore on schedule to open in September and children are currently being placed at the provision as part of the overall placement of EHCP children at this time of year

Additional provision for Merton Medical Education Service/moving Lavender Nursery:

- 2.27. In September, Cabinet agreed to move Merton Medical Education Service (MMES) into the Lavender London Road Nursery building, with Lavender Nursery moving to Steers Mead. This requires a chain of projects to adapt Bond Road Centre and then Steers Mead. Works at Bond Road Centre are completing and works will have commenced at Steers Mead at the time of this committee meeting. This will enable Lavender Nursery to move to its new neighbouring location in April. MMES are planning to use part of the Lavender building in a secure area after February half term and will continue to do so after construction works to adapt the building starts - this will be in April once Lavender nursery moves.

School Attendance

- 2.28. In January, the DfE wrote to Safeguarding Children Partnerships with a request to ensure robust processes are in place to support school attendance for all learners, but particularly for those known to the local authority. Importantly, this stressed attendance in nursery and other pre-school settings.
- 2.29. 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). Current attendance across Merton schools is 89%. Whilst this has been in line with national levels, it is well below the pre-pandemic levels in Merton (typically in the mid-90s). Schools continue to be supported by Infection Control leads from public health with the aim of minimising absence from school.
- 2.30. Schools are working hard with a range of partners to support families to improve the attendance of some children where school absence is not Covid related. In addition the Education Inclusion Team has convened additional 'children missing education' (CME) meetings (as we did in previous

lockdowns) where we reviewed the attendance of children on children in need and child protection plans as well as those in our care who have attendance below 90%. In addition, we will also be looking at all cases under 90% attendance in the Family Wellbeing Service; the Councils targeted Early Health Service. The aim of these panels is to support good attendance, and to share information between education and children social care workforce.

- 2.31. Where this process identifies children who are absent we have convening joined up responses between schools and individual social workers as well as the wider network of professionals.

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