

Committee: Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel

Date: 8th February 2023

Wards: All

Subject: Departmental Update

Lead officer: Jane McSherry, Executive Director of Children, Lifelong Learning and Families

Lead member(s): Cllr Brenda Fraser, Cabinet Member Children's Services, and Cllr Sally Kenny, Cabinet Member Education and Lifelong Learning

Contact officer: Maisie Davies - 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, Lifelong Learning and Families (CLLF) Department, and not covered elsewhere on the agenda. It focuses on those aspects of particular relevance to the department.

2 DETAILS

CHILDREN, LIFELONG LEARNING & FAMILIES

Supporting Schools

School Ofsted Inspections

- 2.1 There have been seven school inspections so far since the beginning of this academic year in September 2023. Of these, five were primary schools: Park Academy, Wimbledon Park, Hatfeild, The Priory and Dundonald. There were two inspections in secondary schools: Harris Academy Merton and Harris Academy Wimbledon.
- 2.2 Both Wimbledon Park Primary School and Harris Academy Merton were found to be outstanding. Park Academy remains a good school following an ungraded (Section 8) inspection with a report that indicates the school may be outstanding at its next graded (Section 5) inspection. Hatfeild Primary was judged to require improvement. Any school which is judged to be less than good receives additional support from our school improvement team and an improvement plan to enable it to move to good or better as soon as better. The reports for the remaining three schools that have been inspected have not yet been published.

- 2.3 School inspections were suspended during the pandemic but in November 2020 Ofsted committed to inspecting all schools between May 2021 and July 2025. In academic year 2022/2023 Ofsted will gradually reduce the gap between inspections of currently Good schools to about five years from the last inspection. This means that there may be a larger than usual number of inspections this year.

Social Workers in Schools

- 2.4 The Social Workers in Schools Project in Merton was set up in September 2020 and is the scale-up of the DfE funded pilot run by the What Works Centre and Cardiff University. The project initially ran from March 2021 until the end of March 2022, but has since been extended until August 2023.
- 2.5 Merton's innovative Social Workers in Schools (SWIS) programme embeds social workers in secondary schools. It delivers reduced referral rates to children's social care (CSC) and to reduce the numbers of Section 17 or Section 47 investigations, along with the overarching aim of reducing the number of children in care and improving educational attainment.
- 2.6 It also aims to promote better inter-agency working between schools and the children's social care system. The SWIS Service in Merton has already evidenced reduced referrals into children's social care and stronger preventative work with children and young people.
- 2.7 The SWIS project is now in its second year and there is evidence of strong relationships between the schools involved and the local authority. This has been supported by the senior leadership teams across both schools and the Local Authority that has championed and supported the project.
- 2.8 On 5th January, Cllr Fraser met with the SWIS team and this was a wonderful experience for the SWIS team to both hear from Cllr Fraser and also to share with her their social work journey, their work with schools and the impact of SWIS project within the schools. The team are currently funded by the DfE until August 2023 and as an authority we would like to explore long term plans for this team beyond August 2023.

Supporting Vulnerable Children

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

- 2.9 As at the 31st December 2022, Merton maintained 2,471 EHCPs.
- 2.10 Over the past calendar year, the service has received 383 requests for an EHCNA (Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment), has agreed to undertake 334 EHCNAs, and agreed to issue 229 EHCPs (Education, Health and Care Plans).
- 2.11 The EHCNA process should be completed within 20 weeks. As of 31st December, the year-to-date timeliness for completing an EHCNA is at 81% in the total number of EHCPs being issued within 20 weeks, excluding exceptions. Although we of course aim to ensure that all EHCPs are issued within this

timescale, our performance is well above the national average, and continues to improve as a result of the concerted efforts of officers in the SENDIS team and the wider SEND partnership.

- 2.12 Following the annual review processes this calendar year the Local Authority has ceased to maintain 174 EHC Plans. 136 children and young people with an EHCP moved out of Merton to another Local Authority and 8 moved abroad. In addition, 84 children and young people with an EHCP moved into Merton and their plan was adopted.

Safety Valve

- 2.13 The third quarterly Safety Valve monitoring report to DfE was submitted to DfE on the 20th January 2023. We await confirmation of the release of the third quarterly payment of £875k. The next return is the year end return due in May 2023. The fourth quarter's payment is expected to be paid in March 2023.
- 2.14 The work against all of the nine conditions in the Safety Valve Agreement are progressing well. As at quarter 3, the in-year deficit had reduced by £3.6m compared to the start of the year. We are still working through the detail of the Dedicated Schools Grant settlement, but we have received at least the growth expected in the plan as well as additional growth to fund 3.4% uplifts in the funding for in-borough community special schools, Additionally Resources Provision (ARPs) and the Alternative Provision (sometimes referred to as the PRU).
- 2.15 We have received feedback from DfE on our application for a new special free school in borough. They have confirmed that the application meets their criteria and that the identification of sites options is the next step.
- 2.16 All other things being equal, we are on course to meet the DfE Safety Valve requirement of balancing the DSG budget ahead of the DfE deadline of 2026/27.

Recruitment and Retention

- 2.17 Further to the work undertaken to review the workforce recruitment and retention offer, the department has worked with colleagues across HR and Finance to make a revised offer to Social Work staff and managers in hard to fill posts. This was informed by a benchmarking exercise which demonstrated that neighbouring and statistically similar boroughs in London offered a higher rate of pay. As a result, and in light of the successful Growth Bid, the department has increased the market supplement offer for Social Workers, Team Managers and Services Managers in specific qualifying roles. All staff affected and staff side representatives have been informed. This information will be used as part of focussed recruitment activity in coming months to recruit and retain social work staff and managers in Children's Social Care.

Family Hubs

- 2.18 Merton's Children Lifelong Learning and Families (CLLF) department, in partnership with Public Health colleagues, have been successful in securing funding through the national DfE Family Hub Local Transformation Fund (TF1) from November 2022 until March 2024.

- 2.19 This Family Hubs Local Transformation Fund is a key part of the government's commitment to champion Family Hubs and is funded through HM Treasury's Shared Outcomes Fund, which aims to test innovative ways of working across the public sector to address complex policy challenges.
- 2.20 To support the development and implementation of the family hub model, following on from a competitive bidding process, the DfE are providing funding to Merton, as one of 12 LAs that do not currently have family hubs. The fund will pay for the change process only, supporting LAs to move to a family hub model through a revenue transformation programme (circa £800k) and capital funding (circa £100k).
- 2.21 Family hubs are defined as a *“place-based way of joining up locally in the planning and delivery of family services. They bring services together to improve access to services and connections between families, professionals and communities - putting relationships at the heart”*.
- 2.22 A Family Hub is a system-wide model of providing high-quality, whole-family, joined up family support services. Family Hubs deliver these family support services from pregnancy, through the child's early years and later childhood, and into early adulthood until they reach the age of 19 (or up to 25 for young people with special educational needs and disabilities). Family hubs are a 'front door' to a range of early help, public health, and wider support services at universal and early help level.
- 2.23 In Merton we are currently developing our programme in line with the national framework which has three main thematic requirements and delivery expectations:
- Access - More accessible – through clearly branded and communicated hub buildings, virtual offers and outreach.
 - Connections - Better connected – family hubs drive progress on joining up professionals, services and providers (state, private, voluntary) – through co- location, data sharing, shared outcomes and governance. Moving from services organised for under-fives, to families with children of all ages, reduces fragmentation (even though an emphasis on early years and the 'Start for Life' offer will remain).
 - Relationships - Relationship-centred – practice in a family hub builds on family strengths and looks to improve family relationships to address underlying issue.
- 2.24 Please see below for links and attachments providing further information:
- National Centre for Family Hubs: National Centre for Family Hubs
 - Family Hubs and Start for Life Programme: Family hubs and start for life programme: local authority guide - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
- 2.25 Over the coming months there will be a series of task and finish groups as well as workshops as we co-design and co-produce our programme. We anticipate a range of stakeholder engagement across the borough, with a focus on the geographical areas where the main Family Hubs are planned in Cricket Green (Phipps Bridge Youth Centre and Church Children Centre) and Longthornton

(Acacia Children's Centre and Adventure Playground). Please contact Allison Jones allison.jones@merton.gov.uk for further information.

Holiday Activities and Food Programme

- 2.26 The government funded Holiday, Activities and Food (HAF) Programme funds holiday clubs to offer physical exercise; arts and cultural activities; healthy food; trips out; and other enriching activities to children from five to fifteen years old who are eligible for benefits-related Free School Meals (FSM) . HAF clubs must provide a minimum of four hours, four days per week, for at least one week in the Easter and Christmas holidays, and four weeks in the summer holiday.
- 2.27 Merton currently has 6,000 children eligible for free school meals and this number has risen significantly over the last two years. Merton has extended the eligibility to attend a HAF club, beyond those eligible for FSM, to children with an EHCP; children with a social or family worker; young carers; children from Ukraine; refugees; and those displaced by the Galpin Road tragedy. We also gave schools flexibility to identify a few more children in families facing other challenging circumstances.
- 2.28 The DfE originally awarded Merton £686,570 to deliver HAF during the Easter, summer and Christmas holidays in 2022. This was later increased by an additional £33,640 in December 2022. The budget was also supplemented by £8,000 from the Early Years and Childcare service, and £1,750 of fund-raising to enable attendance at the pantomime.
- 2.29 All holidays saw a wide variety of activities on offer, including multi-sports, Brazilian capoeira and film-making, with additional enrichment activity including theatre workshops, dance, African drumming, and a reptile experience. Many camps had external trips for example to the south coast, central London, West-end theatres, animal petting at Dean City Farm, and visits to theme parks. In addition, approximately 340 children attended pantomimes at New Wimbledon and Polka theatres at Christmas. Providers are all quality assured through on-site visits and the quality of delivery has largely been strong.
- 2.30 Easter's programme – the first HAF programme which followed Covid - was led largely by Merton's voluntary sector and a few pioneering schools. The programme delivered good volume, with 1,400 places on offer, good participation rates and diverse activities enriched by a "carousel" of providers offering additional enrichment. This was delivered at a cost of £65 per session, and the HAF Board identified that this would need to be reduced to reach more children in future programmes.
- 2.31 Summer and October HAF programmes saw some operational gains: a more robust "code per child" system to ensure participants were eligible; a fixed price of £25 per session (£30 for children in extended categories); and a broader range of providers, including swimming lessons at Canons for many who had never been in a swimming pool before. The voluntary sector still delivered 50% of the programme and an increasing number of schools provided premises. While costs were reduced, and the offer increased, participation rates varied across providers.

- 2.32 Christmas saw us increase grant payments from £25 to £27.50 per child, (with the exception of refugees who were funded at £30). We also piloted some additional SEN provision with four providers. Though marketing improved, seasonal flu affected participation at several providers.
- 2.33 Overall, our HAF programmes have performed well, with a rich variety of activities, trips out and hot food on offer. Around a quarter of participants have a special educational need or disability, and these children have generally thrived well in the activities on offer. Secondary pupils make up less than a quarter of participants, and in 2023 we are seeking to develop provision more tailored to 11-to-15-year-olds, We are developing outdoor learning, film-making, cultural and a wider range of creative arts activities, and more age-targeted sports competitions.
- 2.34 To better meet the needs of children with more complex levels of Special Educational Needs or Disabilities, we are examining how we might improve the links between HAF, short breaks provided for children with SEND, and provision for Children With Disabilities. We plan to put on more specialist SEND provision and we will work with schools to better meet the needs of pupils with SEND in mainstream schooling in mainstream HAF provision.