

Committee: Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel

Date: 13th March 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

- 2.1 The Children, Lifelong Learning and Families (CLLF) Directorate has continued to be busy since the last update in February 2023. The items in this departmental update cover some key items of interest for members, including our work supporting children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, our foster carer recruitment and the accommodation support we provide for care leavers.
- 2.2 I am also delighted to report that in February CLLF was shortlisted for the Local Government Chronicle (LGC) 2023 'Children's Services' Award. This is a testament to the commitment, passion, and creativity of staff across the Department which contributes to positive outcomes for children and young people living and learning in Merton. Personally, I am also proud to have been shortlisted for the LGC 2023 'Outstanding Individual' Award in my role as Director of Children's Services (DCS) for Merton. This nomination would not have been possible without the support of my colleagues across CLLF, and also our corporate and political leadership. The LGC Award winners will be announced at an event in June 2023; however, whatever the outcome, I am immensely proud of the Department's achievements.

Supporting Vulnerable Children

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

- 2.2.1 As at the 31st January 2023, Merton maintained 2,414 Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs).
- 2.2.2 In this calendar year, the service has received 43 requests for an Education, Health, and Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA), has agreed to undertake 50 EHCNAs (some of these referrals were received in December 2022), and agreed to issue 14 EHCPs.
- 2.2.3 The EHCNA process should be completed within 20 weeks. As of 31st January 2023, the year-to-date timeliness for completing an EHCNA is at 86% 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.
- 2.2.4 Following the annual review processes In January 2023, the Local Authority has ceased to maintain 90 EHC Plans. 21 children and young people with an EHCP moved out of Merton to another Local Authority and 1 moved abroad. In addition, 4 children and young people with an EHCP moved into Merton and their plan was adopted.

Access to Short Breaks and Respite Services

- 2.3 Short breaks are activities for children and young people with a disability. The purpose of a short break is to:
- Allow the child or young person to benefit from different experiences and activities
 - Provide some respite for parents and carers from caring responsibilities
 - Informally educate (or enable) children and young people with special needs and disabilities through their leisure time to develop their own capabilities or enhance their personal and social development and confidence.
- 2.4 A short break can comprise a range of activities including:
- Overnight stays in a residential setting
 - Holiday play schemes
 - After school clubs
 - Adventure play and outdoor activities
 - Support to access inclusive mainstream services and services that are available to everyone
- 2.5 Since 1 April 2011, new government legislation was introduced placing a duty on local authorities to provide a short break service for children and young people with disabilities aged 0-18. In addition, there are various legal duties and

obligations contained within the Children's Act 2014 and the Care Act 1989 that require local authorities to make provisions to individual children and families in relation to assessment and care planning and wider commissioning

- 2.6 Details of Merton's Short Breaks offer, including specialist services commissioned by the Council for children who may not be able to independently access services, or have more complex needs can be found on the Merton website and Local Offer.
- 2.7 A review is currently being undertaken of short breaks provision in the borough, with a view to better understand the needs of children and young people, the range of services and activities available across the borough, and our current operating model. This will help to inform future service development, commissioning intentions and support CLLF's strategic priorities for meeting the needs of children with disabilities in Merton.

Support to young children who have been identified as having SEN (0-5)

- 2.8 Children who are born with significant needs are often supported through health services in the early days and may also be supported through Children's Social Care depending on the level of family and child need.
- 2.9 Once it is considered appropriate, and in collaboration with the family and other agencies, a referral (mostly by a health professional) can be made to the Council's Portage and Parenting service. The staff provide a range of services for children aged 0 - 5 including:
 - Home visiting (0 – 3s) where an early education programme is developed based on the child's individual needs. With the advice, encouragement and support from the member of staff the family work through this small steps programme so that the child can make progress and develop in accordance with their individual plan. The staff member will work with the family over a considerable period of time and will also support the family with applications for benefits i.e. Disability Living Allowance, attend appointments, liaise with professionals and help the family navigate the range of support services that may be of benefit.
 - Parenting programmes which are attended by groups of parents whose children may have social and communication delay and be waiting for or have an ASD diagnosis. The Incredible Years programme is an evidenced based programme of 14 – 16 sessions which is offered to parents of young children (aged 2-5) on the Autism spectrum or with language delays in order to promote children's emotional regulation, social competence, language skills, school readiness, and relationships with others.
 - Group drop in sessions are available for families to come in and talk to staff and meet other families. These sessions are play based and provide parents an opportunity to see their children play alongside other children, mutually support each other and find out about various services that can help them through the staff that run the groups. There is always a lot of mess, singing

and music, and children can get involved in their own way in a supportive environment.

- 2.10 Services that are run through Children's Centres are also available to families, including universal groups and health provision.
- 2.11 Families who have children with significant needs, will require varying and individualised service support and these are accessed through a wide range of professionals across the education, health and care sector. As part of our work, staff work with families to help them think about their child starting nursery from the age of 2. Staff will support them to find a suitable place across the early years sector that can best meet their needs, and supporting planning and resourcing to facilitate a smooth transition into provision.

Foster Carer Recruitment

- 2.12 After a particularly difficult year in 2021/2022, when we only recruited 5 mainstream foster carers, 1 connected carer and 1 supported lodgings carer, this year we are on track to recruit 10 foster carers (6 already approved and 4 due at the March fostering panel), 2 connected carers and 1 supported lodgings carer. Previous years spends had been boosted by a 5-year grant to target carers for Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers which ended in 2021.
- 2.13 Alongside the banners we place around the borough, we are looking to extend our digital campaign which has generated the most enquiries and conversions to approvals. So far this year it has generated the most enquiries and approvals. We plan to target the LGBTQ+ community, faith groups and specifically focus on recruiting and developing our current carers to be better equipped to care for children experiencing contextual harm.
- 2.14 We have seen an increase in the number of resignations which highlights the need to focus on retention just as much as recruitment. The central government has just announced a 12.43% increase to the minimum fostering allowances and a paper is being readied to increase Merton's fostering rates. This will include a proposal to waive council tax to those living in the borough. Historically, we have good approval conversion through word of mouth, but this has dropped off this year. We believe that the above actions and increasing the finder's fee will help to improve this.

Care Leavers Accommodation

- 2.15 Merton is currently reliant on spot purchasing from the semi-independent living market to meet the needs of care experienced young people who have moved on from the care placements (usually foster care) and are yet to obtain their own tenancy. Due to significant housing pressures in Merton and wider London, many young people who are ready and able to manage their own tenancies remain in semi-independent accommodation, which is expensive.

- 2.16 It is our goal to enable young people to live independently by the time they turn 21 years old. Merton has a strong focus on 'Staying Put' arrangements which allow young people to remain in their foster homes post-18. Ideally, they would transition straight from their staying put arrangement into their own tenancy prior to the age of 21 (unless it is not compatible with their education plans). For young people who are not ready to manage their own tenancy, we spot purchase from the semi-independent living market, which provides accommodation alongside generalised key work support.
- 2.17 Merton's approach to improving our care leaver accommodation is in three parts:
- Increasing our in house accommodation options
 - Creating our own accommodation framework
 - Reviewing how we discharge our housing duty to care leavers
- 2.18 Increasing our in house accommodation options: a successful business case was made for five Merton owned properties (formerly school caretaker houses) to be transformed into temporary accommodation for care experienced young people. Three of the houses are now vacant and arrangements are being made for the building work to be completed. The properties should be available for young people to move in towards the end of April. A matching meeting has taken place to identify the young people who we will offer to live in the properties. The remaining two properties still have tenants residing in them but are due to vacate soon.
- 2.19 Creating our own accommodation framework: to address our overreliance on spot purchasing from the Semi-Independent Living market a successful business case was made to create our own in house framework. The project is almost at the stage where 'Invitations to Tender' can be sent out and the tender process will be commencing in April. The framework will have four lots:
1. Standard Semi-Independent provider as currently used (accommodation plus 5-15 hours of key work support).
 2. Accommodation with an increased level of landlord/lady support (where the landlord/lady checks in on the house and occupants on a regular basis).
 3. Accommodation (without the additional keywork support)
 4. Providers of support – which will enable us to commission bespoke support for any young person's needs, which can follow them across any of the other lots and even when they enter their own tenancy.
- 2.20 One full time member of staff is being recruited to manage the properties and the framework set out above. A key part of managing the framework will be ensuring that they have up to date knowledge of all local resources to ensure that we are only commissioning key work support when that need cannot be met through already existing services.

- 2.21 Reviewing how we discharge our housing duty to care leavers: senior leaders in Children, Lifelong Learning and Families and Communities and Housing recently reviewed the social housing needs of care experienced young people. A number of ongoing issues in both the private and social housing market currently make it challenging to discharge our housing duty towards many care experienced young people to support them into their own tenancy prior to the age of 21. Despite significant housing pressures in Merton, the Housing Department has protected the Children Act quota of 15 tenancies per year and, on average, provides more than the agreed 15. To meet the housing needs of our care experienced young people and discharge our housing duty to them through social tenancies, would require Merton more than doubling the Children Act housing quota. However, increases to the Children Act quota would impact negatively on other vulnerable priority groups.
- 2.22 In light of the above, a recommendation is being made to further develop the strategies in Merton that deal with housing and homelessness to ensure a more joined up approach in how we discharge our housing duty to care leavers and how we provide them with temporary accommodation. Both the in house accommodation and framework will work towards improving the temporary accommodation offer and further work will be done around our strategies to support care experienced young people to gain tenancies both in the social and private sector.

Safety Valve

- 2.23 The third quarterly Safety Valve monitoring report (submitted to the DfE in January) was reported to Scrutiny in February. The next quarterly update will be provided to Members in June.