

Committee: Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel

Date: 13th March 2023

Agenda item:

Subject: Corporate Parenting Board Annual Report 21-22

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

Lead member: Cllr Brenda Fraser, Cabinet Member Children's Services

Contact officer: David Michael, Head of Corporate Parenting

Recommendations:

A. Members to note the contents of the report

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1. This report is an overview of Merton's Children's Services performance in meeting the needs of our children in care and care experienced young people in the reporting year April 2021 – March 2022.

2 DETAIL

2.1. This report covers the reporting year April 2021 to March 2022 which follows an unprecedented period in living memory, with Covid-19, lockdowns, and the many challenges those brought. Children in care and care experienced young people are some of the most vulnerable and marginalised people in society. Such challenges and pressures on societies tend to have the biggest impact on our most vulnerable and push them further towards the fringes. It is our duty as corporate parents to minimise this impact and shield our corporate children and young people as much as possible, just as we would with children within our own family networks.

2.2. This report is an overview of Merton's Children's Services performance in meeting the needs of our children in care and care experienced young people.

2.3. Highlights from the report are outlined below:

2.4. Despite the ongoing challenges around Covid-19, in this year, Merton's services for children looked after and care experienced young people was found to be 'Outstanding' by Ofsted in February 2022. Ofsted said of our services supporting children in care that 'teams of highly committed, ambitious and determined professionals work extremely well together to help children to remain safe and achieve in life.'

2.5. During this year, there was also a restructure across Children's Social Care and turnover in leadership with three Assistant Directors. Despite this, the newly formed Corporate Parenting Service, which united most corporate parenting operational functions into the one service, maintained strong succession planning with the internal promotions of our new permanent CEO, the Director of Children Services, and Assistant Director of Education. The commitment and high aspirations of senior managers and political leaders in Merton was also recognised by Ofsted.

2.6. The overall number of children in care decreased again, a pattern which was mirrored across other cohorts of children and contributable to Merton's practice model. However, we expect these numbers to stabilise moving forward due to consistency in the numbers of children entering care.

2.7. There was an increase in the average duration of court proceedings which was attributable to the back log experienced by the courts following the Covid-19 lockdowns.

2.8. The first constellation of the Mockingbird Family Model of Fostering was launched. It was a disappointing year for the recruitment of foster carers which was anecdotally experienced across other boroughs.

2.9. Timeliness of Initial Health Assessments continues to be an issue which we are working with health colleagues to address. However, Merton's performance in the number of children was up-to-date review health assessments, dental checks, and strengths and difficulties questionnaire was good in comparison with other national and London Local Authorities.

2.10. Merton remains good at *keeping in touch* with our care experienced young people and ensuring that they are in appropriate accommodation. Our Corporate Parenting commitment is evidenced through the high numbers of care leavers remaining with their former foster carers and *staying put* arrangements. We continue to improve and perform well in comparison to other Local Authorities around the numbers of care leavers we have in education, training, and employment.

2.11. Merton's Children in Care council '*Our Voice*' was relaunched following the lockdowns and has continued to grow. Ofsted acknowledged our 'vibrant Young Inspectors team and... active Children in Care Council' which ensure that children's views influence decisions by elected members and senior officers. Corporate parenting across the council was recognised as a priority.

2.12. A Coram Voice *Bright Spots Survey* was commissioned and concluded at the end of the year. The response rate was high and the results will inform the next Corporate Parenting Strategy.

2 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

3.1 Not applicable

4 TIMETABLE

4.1 Not applicable

5 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Not applicable

6 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Not applicable

7 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

7.1 Not applicable

8 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

8.1 Not applicable

9 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

9.1 Not applicable

10 APPENDICES – THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS ARE TO BE PUBLISHED WITH THIS REPORT AND FORM PART OF THE REPORT

10.1 Corporate Parenting Annual Report 21-22.

11 BACKGROUND PAPERS

11.1 None

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