

Committee: Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel

Date: 21st June 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 Since my last update in March, there have been several changes in the Children, Lifelong Learning and Families senior leadership team. Our previous Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion, Dheeraj Chibber, has moved on to take up a Director of Children's Services role in Luton. I am delighted that David Michael, our Head of Corporate Parenting, is taking over the Assistant Director role in the interim. Current Heads, Teresa Hills and Michelle Waldron, have taken sideways steps to further develop their skills as Head of Corporate Parenting and Head of Adolescent & Safeguarding respectively. Tendai Dooley, a highly experienced and rated locum, will cover the vacancy created by David's interim promotion as the Head of Family Support and Safeguarding. Finally, Heather Smith has secured an internal promotion to become Head of Family Help and Assessment. These development opportunities will ensure stability of leadership and continuity of service provision.
- 2.2 Recently the CLLF Departmental Management team all attended the Leadership in Colour pan London conference. As a senior leadership team we are committed to ensuring that Children, Lifelong Learning and Families has an inclusive and diverse workforce from the top-down and engages best

practice in supporting children and families of colour. We were really proud to have one of our own Heads of Service, Teresa Hills, sharing her experiences as a leader and presenting her key takeaways for children's systems leaders at the Summit.

2.3 The rest of this report highlights some of the Department's key activity over the last few months.

LGC Awards

- 2.4 As reported previously, we were delighted in February to learn that we had been shortlisted for two Local Government Chronicle (LGC) 2023 Awards. Children, Lifelong Learning and Families was shortlisted for the '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. It was a fantastic opportunity to showcase the Department's work, particularly around how CLLF puts children and young people at the heart of their work, strives to continuously improve, create and innovate; and works in close collaboration with partners. One of the Department's Young Inspectors, Denise Candengue, paired up with our Head of Family Safeguarding, Teresa Hills, to present to a panel of judges at the LGC in April 2023.
- 2.5 Jane McSherry was also shortlisted for the 'Outstanding Individual' Award. Our Young Scrutineer and former Young Inspector said of the nomination, *"I believe that she [Jane] has always had Merton's children and young people truly at the core of her focus and achievements, and this really shines through with the respect and value she has given to the Young Inspectors team as well as my role in scrutiny."* One of our Young Inspectors working in Public Health, Anna Huk, presented to the LGC judging panel alongside our then Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion, Dheeraj Chibber.

Supporting Schools

Beat the Street Initiative

- 2.6 This spring, over 22,000 people across Merton took part in 'Beat the Street', a free, fun walking, cycling and wheeling game aimed at increasing activity levels. All 47 primary schools, including three special schools, across Merton took part in the challenge, competing to see who could travel the furthest over the six weeks.
- 2.7 Behaviour Support Lead & PE Coordinator at Poplar Primary School said of the initiative: *"After our visit from Chloe [Beat the Street Local Engagement Coordinator] the whole school was buzzing with excitement to get going. The younger children love the fact that they had their own card. It was fantastic to see the children walking around with maps to navigate their way, which is a skill we are all forgetting to use as we become more reliant on mobile devices. I have had some children tell me that they have changed their route to school and now leave a bit earlier so they can scan more boxes on their way. Others are meeting with friends to go for bike rides at the weekends and family walks."*

It's been great and the whole Poplar community are really enjoying being part of it".

- 2.8 Over half of all children who took part in Beat the Street self-reported as being 'less active' (undertaking less than 30 minutes of activity a day). Data collected after the game show that physical inactivity levels declined and there was an increase in the proportion of children meeting the CMO guidelines for activity. One boy, under 11 years old, said: *"It helped me because it made me do exercise and it got me moving more faster and made me tired."*
- 2.9 Beat the Street Merton supported the community in coming together with children at the forefront. The PE Coordinator at the winning primary school, St John Fisher RC Primary School, said when they found out the school had won: *"We are all very proud. All the children and wider school community were so excited by the scheme and had so much fun!"*.
- 2.10 Beat the Street is now moving into legacy stage, working closely with the Borough of Sport priority to promote the fantastic assets and programmes available in schools and communities all across Merton.

School admissions

- 2.11 Primary School Admissions offer day was 17 April, following on from Secondary School offer day on 1 March 2023. In both cases every Merton resident that applied received an offer of a place.
- 2.12 For primary schools we were able to offer 85% of school children a place at their first preference primary school – a further increase of 1% on last year and 3% on the year before. 94% of Merton children were offered a place in one of their top three preferred primary schools, with over 96% receiving a place at one of their six preferences.
- 2.13 We received 102 less on-time resident applications, further reflecting the drop in demand reported to this committee in November.
- 2.14 For secondary schools, nearly 90% of Merton children were offered a place in one of their top three preferred secondary schools. After a significant rise in demand, and therefore applications, over the past 10 or so years, there was a drop in applications this year; this was forecast. However, we are not expecting a significant drop in roll in any secondary schools this year as some neighbouring boroughs still have increasing demand in year 7.

Universal Free School meals for all primary school children

- 2.15 In February 2023, the London Mayor announced that the Greater London Authority (GLA) would fund Universal Infant Free School Meals for all Key Stage 2 (aged 7-11) primary school children for the academic year 2023/24. This follows on from the government introducing Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSM) in 2014, which was never extended to Key Stage 2.
- 2.16 36 of the Merton's 44 state primary schools and all 3 special schools choose to be part of the council's central catering contract, currently with Caterlink; this

gives Merton Council more control over delivering this initiative than some other councils. The increase in meals will present some logistical challenges but officers are confident that the Mayor's initiative can be delivered for September.

School Inspections

- 2.17 Since the last update (at the beginning of the spring term 2023) there have been 12 further inspections in Merton schools. Of these, nine are primary schools, two are secondary schools and one is a special school.
- 2.18 Eight of these inspections were ungraded inspections of previously Good schools. Ungraded inspections do not make graded judgements but report whether the school has sustained the same grade as at the school's previous graded inspection. While St John Fisher Catholic Primary school awaits the publication of its report, the other seven schools (Gorrington Park, Hillcross, Abbotsbury, Sacred Heart, St Matthew's CE, St Mark's CE Academy and Wimbledon College) continue to be Good schools.
- 2.19 Inspectors have reported that sufficient evidence of improved performance suggests that Hillcross Primary and St Mark's CE Academy could be judged outstanding if they had a graded inspection now. Their next inspections will be graded inspections within the next one to two years.
- 2.20 Cricket Green special school continues to be an Outstanding school.
- 2.21 St Peter and Paul Catholic primary had a graded inspection in March 2023 and is graded Good overall and for each judgement area. St Thomas of Canterbury Catholic primary and Stanford primary schools each had graded inspections; the reports have not yet been published.
- 2.22 In total, there have been 19 school inspections in academic year 2022 – 2023. Of the sixteen published reports, all but one is Good or better.
- 2.23 School inspections were suspended during the pandemic but in November 2020 Ofsted committed to inspecting all schools between May 2021 and July 2025. There could be up to nine further inspections of Merton schools in the final half term of this academic year.

School Attendance

- 2.24 Nationally we know that school attendance has been significantly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The national school attendance rate is approximately 2% below pre-pandemic level (2018/19 data) and children who attend school less than 90% of the time is approximately three times the level it was pre-pandemic. The Government has issued new guidance to schools and local authorities about how to support good attendance. Merton has been implementing this guidance across the school year. All local authorities are expected to produce a self-assessment against the new guidance and the Department for Education (DfE) will be holding support meetings with local authorities (likely in the Autumn term) to further advise on implementation of the guidance.

- 2.25 Merton has put in place an action plan, which is overseen by the multi-agency Prevention and Early Intervention sub-group of the Merton Safeguarding Children Partnership. We will be further developing our understanding of the new 'severe attendance' category (under 50%) and interventions to improve school attendance. We know that anxiety and mental health concerns are a significant driver in poor attendance and we have been working with our health colleagues, launching with Primary Heads a new tool to support better access to mental health support related to emotionally based school avoidance.
- 2.26 Attendance is monitored closely using the DfE's new WONDE system that tracks data on a daily basis on all children nationally (for those schools who have signed up to WONDE). It is important to note that the DfE's attendance data using WONDE is experimental and undergoing evaluation. There are some known issues with the national collection of this data which affect its accuracy locally, regionally and nationally. Therefore these figures should only be treated as indicative of the attendance picture.
- 2.27 The most recent WONDE attendance figures published nationally were for the period of September 2022 up to 12 May 2023. Merton's primary school attendance was 94.21% and secondary school attendance was 93.36%, both of which are better than national and London averages (94.07% and 93.74% respectively for primary; 90.92% and 91.95% respectively for secondary). However, at 82.94%, Merton's special school rates were below national and London averages (86.86% and 86.20% respectively). Overall, these figures show that Merton are performing well against our peers on school attendance; however, we recognise that there is more to do for children in special schools, and to increase attendance in the context of lower levels post-pandemic.

Exclusions

- 2.28 Schools can suspend a pupil for a fixed term or permanently exclude a child for a serious breach of the behaviour code in a school. Exclusions are monitored monthly to track any emerging trends and target support. In Merton, significant work is undertaken with children, families and teachers with the aim to reduce the use of exclusions.
- 2.29 Merton secondary schools have seen a rise in permanent exclusions this year, while fixed term exclusions are slightly lower than previous years. Last year permanent exclusion rates were particularly low (9), however the rate for this year so far (21) brings us in line with the pre-pandemic rate in 2018/19. In response to the recent rise in permanent exclusions, secondary school headteachers in Merton met with the Local Authority to analyse the reasons for exclusions and to identify solutions to address the increase. The analysis showed emerging themes around contextual safeguarding and exclusions of girls. However, significant multi-agency work to address contextual safeguarding issues in recent months (reported in the November 2022 Departmental Update to this Committee) has had a positive impact and our latest exclusions data suggests that the rise has started to level off. Discussions

with schools are also ongoing and they are sharing good practice around how they can support children and young people, for example, with the development of more community based or alternative curriculum options.

Supporting Vulnerable Children

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

- 2.30 As at the 30th April 2023, Merton maintained 2,458 Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs).
- 2.31 In this calendar year (Jan to Apr 2023), the service has received 172 requests for an Education, Health, and Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA). This calendar year the Local Authority has agreed to undertake 145 EHCNAs, and agreed to issue 90 EHCPs.
- 2.32 The EHCNA process should be completed within 20 weeks. As of 30th April 2023, the year-to-date timeliness for completing an EHCNA is at 70% 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.
- 2.33 Following annual review processes the Local Authority has ceased to maintain 109 EHC Plans. 56 children and young people with an EHCP moved out of Merton to another Local Authority and 5 pupils moved abroad. In addition, 20 children and young people with an EHCP moved into Merton and their plan was adopted.

Stable Homes Consultation

- 2.34 In February 2023, the Department for Education (DfE) published their [Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation Strategy and Consultation](#). The consultation responded to three independent reviews that were published in 2022 (The Competition and Markets Authority's Children's Social Care market study; Child Protection in England; and the Independent Review of Children's Social Care). The DfE's Implementation Strategy centres around six pillars to '*transform children's social care.*' These include:
- Pillar 1: Family Help provides the right support at the right time so that children can thrive with their families
 - Pillar 2: A decisive multi-agency child protection system
 - Pillar 3: Unlocking the potential for family networks
 - Pillar 4: Putting love, relationships and a stable home at the heart of being a child in care
 - Pillar 5: A valued, supported and highly-skilled social worker for every child who needs one

- Pillar 6: A system that continuously learns and improves, and makes better use of evidence and data
- 2.35 The Children, Lifelong Learning and Families Department consulted with a range of partners through our safeguarding children partnership and corporate parenting board in order to formulate an informed response to submit to the DfE. We also invited Our Voice, our local children in care and care experienced young people council to contribute their views to the consultation. They provided us with a range of views across the six pillars, which we also used to inform our response.
- 2.36 Merton is part of *Developing Together* alongside Kingston, Richmond, Sutton, Wandsworth and Surrey. *Developing Together* is a teaching partnership which offers an ambitious and comprehensive programme of education, training, support and professional development for Social Workers across the region. We have been successful in our bid for *Developing Together* to become an Early Adopter of the Early Career Framework pilot (linked with Pillar 5). Merton will be working with the DfE and other boroughs across the country to set the pilot methodology between June and September.
- 2.37 Overall, along with our partners and young people, we welcome the focus on early help, supporting family networks, embedding multi-disciplinary and specialist teams, improving recruitment and retention of social workers and strengthening corporate parenting principles. However, we also highlighted the challenges raised by our partners and young people that we would like to see addressed by the DfE – for example, the importance of local areas being able to co-produce solutions with families; provision of sufficient funding to embed the reforms; and ensuring alignment with other national strategies, plans and policies.

Immigration Pledge

- 2.38 Merton has been working with South London Refugee Association's (SLRA) Early Intervention Project (EIP) since 2018 to ensure that all of our unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people are provided with prompt legal representation and support with their asylum applications at every step of the way. The EIP also provides guidance to Merton staff in respect of this very complex area of legislation, working alongside Merton social workers and Personal Advisers to help our looked after children and young people navigate the process of claiming asylum.
- 2.39 Earlier this year, the Corporate Parenting Board signed a Pledge to support all looked after children and young people with their immigration status, one of the first Local Authorities in the UK to do so. On 11th May, the Local Authority celebrated the signing of that Pledge, hearing stories from three of our young people about their own personal experiences.

Safety Valve

- 2.40 The end of year Safety Valve report for 2022/23 was submitted to DfE on the 19th May. The report demonstrated good progress against all of the conditions agreed with DfE as part of the plan. In particular, we have revised our processes to be more in line with other local authorities, have enhanced our support to schools and are expanding in-borough provision.
- 2.41 The number of Education Health & Care Plans (EHCPs) has stabilised in contrast to the pre-plan estimate of year-on-year growth in the number of plans on more than 300 per year. As at end of March 2023 there were 2,446 live EHCPs compared to 2,497 as at the end of March 2022. Underneath this headline figure there re new plans being agreed every month (around 7 per month) as well as plans being ceased due to young people leaving education or moving out of borough.
- 2.42 We have enhanced our support to mainstream schools to help them in supporting children with SEND in mainstream settings where that is the most appropriate outcome.
- 2.43 We have expanded in-borough special schools places at Whatley Avenue, with 41 new places filled so far, rising to 60 by September. We have also included Additional Resourced Provisions (ARPs) by 33 places. The further expansion of in-borough provision remains a priority for both ARPs and Special School places. We are currently working with DfE to identify a suitable site for a new special school in Merton, to complement our existing three schools.
- 2.44 As at year end, the in-year deficit was £10.7m, short of the £6.9m deficit set out in the plan. However, DfE brought forward £3.2m of their £28m contribution, reducing the year end position to £7.5m. The ongoing dependency on high-cost independent schools remains a significant issue, hence the priority around expanding in-borough places.
- 2.45 We remain on track to meet the plan over the five years agreed with DfE, and continue to achieve balance ahead of that timescale.