

Committee: Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel

Date: 20th September 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 June, there have been some changes to the senior leadership team in Children, Lifelong Learning and Families. Our interim Assistant Director for Strategy, Commissioning and Transformation, Richard Ellis, has moved on to take up a new role at Kent County Council. I am pleased to say that Tom Procter, currently our Head of Contracts and School Organisation, will be covering the Assistant Director post until we go out to permanent recruitment. Our Head of Performance, Improvement and Partnerships, Maisie Davies, will be going on maternity leave from October and we are currently in the process of recruiting to her maternity cover. In Children's Social Care, Teresa Hills, who is our interim Head of Corporate Parenting, is moving on to an Assistant Director position at Luton Council. Our Head of School Improvement, Rachel Bowerman, will also be moving on at the end of the autumn term.
- 2.2 The rest of this report highlights some of the Department's key activity over the last few months.

Children and Young People Consultation

- 2.3 The Children, Lifelong Learning and Families Department have launched a new consultation for children and young people who live, study or socialise in the London Borough of Merton, on behalf of the Children's Trust.
- 2.4 Merton's Children's Trust works with partners to agree actions that will improve the lives of children and young people, which is set out in the Children and Young People's Plan. A substantial part of the plan is ensuring we are hearing from children and young people, and therefore we have been running a survey and conducting focus groups over the summer to ensure as many children and young people as possible are able to have a say. Feedback from the survey will also contribute to other strategies that are currently being refreshed within Merton (our Early Help Strategy and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Strategy, for example).
- 2.5 We hope to reach a wide range of children and young people, hence why we are running both a survey and targeted focus groups. We are working with primary and secondary schools to increase our reach, and the survey will run into the Autumn term to enable more schools to participate. Additionally, we have promoted the survey via the Participation and Engagement team's Instagram page, shared the survey materials with stakeholders who support Merton's children and young people (such as Student Spectra who support our LGBT+ youth community) and will be visiting some of our Holiday, Activity and Food (HAF) programmes and youth centres.
- 2.6 The Department have run similar engagement activity work previously to inform the work of our Children's Trust Board. The last major engagement survey we ran under the remit of the Children's Trust Board was our Young residents survey on the impact of Covid-19 on young people in Merton in 2021. This survey reached over 2,000 children and young people and informed our current action plan overseen by the Board.

Supporting Schools

Children Missing Education

- 2.7 Merton runs a monthly multi-agency Children Missing Education (CME) panel. This approach was recognised as an example of good practice in our Ofsted ILACs inspection last year. The panel is chaired by the Head of Service for Education Inclusion, and core membership consists of representatives from the Education Welfare Service, School Nursing and the Virtual Behaviour Service, with the Executive Headteacher of Melbury College. Team managers from Children's Social Care, and lead officers from the Youth Justice Service, SENDIS, the Family Wellbeing Service, School Admissions and the Virtual School also attend to discuss the cases that are tracked.
- 2.8 The panel oversees children who are off roll and not yet moved into a school. In addition, Merton has always reviewed a much larger group of children and young people, who are on the roll of a school but have less than 25% attendance.

- 2.9 Performance with regards to CME is reported to members every year within the Schools' Standards' Report (in February/March). Anticipating some of the contents of this report, it should be noted that we have seen a rise in the number of children and young people not on a school roll, and of those whose attendance at school is below 25%. A noticeable group are cases where families who arrive in Merton, register for a school place, but then do not attend school. Education Welfare Officers track those children and families, most of whom have moved out of the borough again.
- 2.10 Of the group with below 25% attendance, a large subgroup are children with special educational needs or disabilities, where the authority is looking for a specialist placement in a market where there is nationally increasing demand and limited supply.
- 2.11 The Education Welfare Service also follows up children who are removed from school rolls. Schools can only take children off roll on specific legal grounds and should endeavour to find out where the family are moving to so the new host authority can be made aware. If the school cannot find this out, officers follow up including undertaking home visits where appropriate.
- 2.12 In 2021/22 there were 2,634 children who came off roll from Merton schools during the academic year. Education Welfare had to track 560 and had a clear up rate of finding children and informing local authorities of 96%.
- 2.13 Another group of children that are outside the school system are those who are Electively Home Educated (EHE). The number of families choosing to educate their own children rose sharply during the pandemic. The number has reduced again, but is still at a higher level than before the pandemic. The annual data is reported in the Schools' Standards' Report, but levels of EHE are monitored on a monthly basis by senior leaders.

Early Help and Early Years

- 2.14 On 2nd August a range of events were held across our two Family Hub sites to launch the Merton Family Hub brand and locations. Family Hub One is based at the Phipps Bridge Youth Centre and Church Road Children's Centre, and Family Hub Two at the Acacia Adventure Playground and Acacia Children's Centre. Over 500 families and local organisations came to help us celebrate, which also coincided with National Play Day. Please see web pages for more details [Family Hubs | Merton Council](#), and plans for further developments over the coming months
- 2.15 In June we established our Start for Life Partnership, focusing on the first 1001 days from conception until a child is aged two. By the end of the autumn term we intend to publish our Start for Life Offer which aims to make information, access and take up of early years services easier for families and professionals, providing earlier intervention and family support during this very important phase of early childhood. [Publishing your Start for Life offer - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

- 2.16 The recent announcement regarding the expansion of free early years education and childcare for working families with children from 9 months up to 5, and the wraparound provision for school aged children in all primary schools will require significant planning over the coming months. Work is currently taking place to better understand the supply and demand for free early years places from 9 months to 3 years, running alongside our wider project and programme planning. Key to the success will be coproduction and engagement with service users (families), and with our range of childcare and early education providers (including childminders). Merton has existing and well established partnerships with the childcare and early years sector. We will build on this to deliver this ambitious programme across the early years sector so that there is sufficient free early education and childcare that meet the needs of families in Merton.
- 2.17 In line with government's timescales we will incrementally introduce free places across the early years age range from April 2024 up until September 2025, whereby we will be at full rollout. [Early education entitlements and funding update: March 2023 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/early-education-entitlements-and-funding-update-march-2023)

Free School Meals

- 2.18 Over the summer period children in Merton Schools on benefits related Free School Meals were able to receive an £80 supermarket food voucher. We are continuing to provide these for the school holidays until at least Easter 2024, with £30 for each of the Christmas and Easter holidays, and £15 for the half terms.
- 2.19 From the start of term in September all Key Stage 2 children are able to benefit from a free school meal during term time irrespective of income, funded by the Mayor of London. Officers have been working with schools and the catering provider that provides meals for the vast majority of primary schools.

Supporting Vulnerable Children

Supporting Vulnerable Children with Education, Health and Care Plans

- 2.20 As at the 31st July 2023, Merton maintained 2469 Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), an increase of 49 in comparison with the same time last year.
- 2.21 In this calendar year (Jan to 31st July 2023), the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Integrated Service (SENDIS) has received 308 requests for an Education Health and Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA). This calendar year the LA has agreed to undertake 233 EHCNA's, and agreed to issue 172 EHCPs.
- 2.22 The EHCNA process should be completed within 20 weeks. As of 31st July 2023, and excluding exceptions, 58% of EHCNAs led to EHCPs being issued within the statutory 20 weeks. This is a decrease in timeliness in comparison with the last report and is due to a combination of factors which include: delays in receiving professional advice; challenging staffing issues across education, health and social care; and an increase in demand for EHCNA's. The

partnership have met to discuss how the capacity issues will be addressed in order to ensure our timeliness improves in the next quarter.

- 2.23 Following annual review processes the Local Authority has ceased to maintain 171 EHC Plans since January 2023. In addition, 85 children and young people with an EHCP moved out of Merton to another Local Authority and 7 pupils moved abroad, whilst 46 children and young people with an EHCP moved into Merton and their plan was adopted.

Corporate Parenting - supporting and celebrating our children in care and care leavers

- 2.24 At the end of July, we had our summer parties for our children in care and care leavers. On 25 July we had an event for the younger group (0-15) at the Acacia Children's Centre, which Cllr Fraser attended. This was a fancy-dress party with staff and children showing us their superhero talents. On the 27 July, we had the party and barbecue for our older cohort (16-25) including competitions for young people, staff and Cllr Fraser. As last year the young people won the tug of war! It was a lovely opportunity to enjoy social activities and fun and luckily the rain held off. Thank you to everyone who supported and enabled our young people to have such a special time.
- 2.25 On the evening of the 27th, we also held our Corporate Parenting Board Awayday. We went to Morden Park House, which is a lovely location and had a great turnout with members of the Board, staff, foster carers and many of our young people. The evening was facilitated by Mark Riddell, the DfE Adviser on Children in Care and Care Leavers, who is care experienced himself. We spent time listening to the young people and planning for what we need to improve as well as reflecting on what works well for our young people. It is always a privilege and a pleasure to spend time with our children and enjoy their insights and enthusiasm and everyone came away from the evening feeling positive and inspired. Thank you to our Participation team and Young Inspectors for their support of this event.

Supporting Families experiencing Child and Adolescent to Parent Violence and Abuse (CAPVA)

- 2.26 In April this year, Children, Lifelong Learning and Families applied for grant funding from the Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) to support our local partnership drive improvements to the ways in which CAPVA is identified and responded to. In July we were delighted to find out our bid for the two year programme had been successful and we are liaising with the VRU to implement the project. As part of the bid, we will be working with our partners to better identify and respond to CAPVA through specialist consultation support, reviewing our systems and processes, and supporting increased learning and development opportunities across our multi-agency workforce.

Local Research on Youth Violence

- 2.27 Merton has received funding of £5,000 from the Violence Reduction Unit following a stabbing incident in February 2023 in order to seek consultation from a field expert and formulate recommendations relating to multi-agency responses to youth violence within the borough involving gangs and groups. Junior Smart from Smart Training and Consulting was commissioned to conduct the research with the final report for consideration to be produced by September 2023.
- 2.28 The overall focus of the work is on disruption and prevention, looking at the 12 months prior to March 2023, with particular emphasis placed on the period from the stabbing incident summer 2022 onwards, a time where the commissioning and steering group describes as pivotal to the incident itself.

Working Together Consultation

- 2.29 On 21 June, the Department for Education launched their consultation on changes to the statutory guidance: Working Together to Safeguarding Children¹. The guidance sets out what is expected of agencies, organisations and individuals to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in their area. It follows the publication in February 2023 of the Government's Stable Homes, Built on Love Consultation², which responded to the recommendations of three national reviews³. The guidance proposes changes in five key areas:
- A shared endeavour introduces expectations for effective multi-agency working and practice principles for working with parents and carers
 - Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements clarifies roles and responsibilities, introduces a partnership chair and deepens accountability and transparency
 - Help and support for children and their families includes stronger expectations on Early Help and family networks, clarifies permissions on working with children under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 and emphasises support for disabled children.
 - Decisive multi-agency child protection introduces new national multi-agency child protection standards for practitioners and approaches to harm outside the home
 - Learning from serious child safeguarding incidents.

¹ [Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023 - consultation document \(education.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/working-together-to-safeguard-children-2023)

² [Children's social care stable homes built on love consultation \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/consultations/childrens-social-care-stable-homes-built-on-love-consultation)

³ The Independent Review of Children's Social Care (The Care Review) 2022; The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (the Panel) review into the deaths of Star Hobson and Arthur Labinjo-Hughes (the National Review) 2022; and The Competition and Markets Authority's (CMA) Children's Social Care market study 2022

- 2.30 Children, Lifelong Learning and Families responded to the consultation and have considered the implications with our safeguarding partners in the Merton Safeguarding Children Partnership.

Safety Valve

- 2.31 The most recent monitoring return to the Department for Education was submitted on the 15th September. It continued to show good progress to delivering financial balance within the five years of the plan.
- 2.32 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 July 2023 there were 2,470 EHCPs compared to 2,497 as at the end of March 2022. Underneath this headline figure there are new plans being agreed every month as well as plans being ceased due to young people leaving education or moving out of borough.
- 2.33 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.
- 2.34 DfE announced funding for the new special free school in Merton on 23rd August 2023. We are currently working with DfE on site identification and the process to find an operator.
- 2.35 We remain on track to meet the plan over the five years agreed with DfE, and continue to achieve balance ahead of that timescale.

This page is intentionally left blank