

Committee: Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel

Date: 22nd November 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: Tim Wallder – Interim 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 September our Head of Performance, Improvement and Partnerships, Maisie Davies, has gone on maternity leave and we wish her well. Tim Wallder will be covering her position until she returns next year. We said goodbye to Teresa Hills and Tendai Dooley in October, who have provided excellent leadership to our Family Support and Safeguarding and Corporate Parenting services. We are pleased to announce that we have permanently recruited to our new Head of Family Support and Safeguarding. We have internal leaders acting up in Rosemary Frimpong (interim Head of Corporate Parenting) and Kay Dove and Rorie Ovens (interim Heads of Family Support and Safeguarding), providing stability to these services in the meantime.
- 2.2 The rest of this report highlights some of the Department's key activity since the last report in September.

Children and Young People Consultation

- 2.3 As reported to members in the previous departmental update, over the Summer and Autumn the Children, Lifelong Learning and Families Department 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 The consultation closed on Tuesday 3rd October; we received over 2300 responses to the consultation and delivered focus groups within schools and other forums across Merton.
- 2.5 Initial findings around safety in their local communities, found that over 80% stated they "mostly" or "all of the time" feel safe. Parents/Carers, friends and the police were the individuals who most made young people feel safe.
- 2.6 Over 62% of young people who responded access their park to be physically active, and over 73% responded "yes" when asked if their school/college gave them opportunities to lead a healthy lifestyle.
- 2.7 Over 60% stated that green spaces in Merton are looked after "very well" or "quite well".
- 2.8 The Policy & Partnership team will review the findings and meet with Young Inspectors advance of the Children's Trust Board in December, to consider the 7 findings and emerging themes for the new Children & Young People's Plan, which will be refreshed for 2024 onwards.

Supporting Schools

School Ofsted inspections

- 2.9 Two schools have been inspected so far this academic year: Ricards Lodge and Cranmer. Ricards Lodge has retained its outstanding judgement, and Cranmer's report is yet to be published.

School Attendance

- 2.10 Although rates of school attendance in Merton are better than national and outer London averages in primary and secondary schools, and in the Pupil Referral Unit, they are 2-3 percentage points below pre-pandemic levels, and the number of pupils with 'Persistent Absence' (below 90% attendance) is double the level it was in 2019. This pattern is similar to that seen in other local authorities nationally. Improving attendance is therefore a key strategic priority for the Council, with an overarching approach that 'Attendance is Everybody's Business', ensuring that there is a multi-agency approach to the issue.
- 2.11 Merton's plan to improve attendance is monitored by the Prevention & Early Intervention subgroup of the Merton Safeguarding Children Partnership. An example of the work in the last school year was the development of an excellent tool to support schools to make sure that children with mental health issues that are affecting their attendance can receive help.
- 2.12 The Department for Education produced new guidance on attendance for schools and local authorities earlier this year. In line with this guidance we have carried out a multi-agency self-assessment focusing on attendance, and

created a new strategy. Activity within the new strategy includes the recent formation of a new Attendance Team:

- the Education Welfare Service leads on advice, support and challenge for all schools;
- targeted support is provided to schools with the lowest levels of attendance;
- the Social Workers in Schools team (SWIS) supports secondary schools to develop support for attendance within their early help offer;
- Early Help coordinators provide the same support in primary schools.

Partners across education, health and care are coming together to focus on the issue, and a set of leaflets for professionals, parents and children promoting good attendance have been produced.

2.13 The DfE are meeting with all local authorities this term to support with benchmarking our self-assessment and strategy.

Early Years

2.14 Following the Government's announcements in the spring budget earlier this year, the Department for Education is starting to release further details around the national childcare reforms, which includes investment in the system to expand early years entitlements and wraparound childcare. As we receive this information, we are disseminating communications across our early years sector and promoting the new entitlements to families.

2.15 The reforms are designed to support more parents who are currently struggling to work, or to work longer hours, because they do not have sufficient childcare.

2.16 The first expansion will start from April 2024, when working parents of two-year-olds will be able to access 15 hours of free childcare. In January 2024, families will be able to check eligibility and secure their "codes" for accessing a place.

2.17 Local authorities will receive grant funding to support with the roll out of the new childcare reforms across the next three years, and funding and delivery plans will be required as we develop our local approach.

2.18 In September we employed a new role to lead on our childcare sufficiency statutory duties and engage with the expanding early years sector to work together to meet the new duties.

Early Help

2.19 The transformation across our Family Hubs is now starting to embed and we have developed and delivered on key pieces of work, with a focus on the 0-2 year olds' 'Start for Life' offer. We have held our first Merton Family Voice engagement session for families, from pregnancy and up to 2 years old, with ongoing meetings scheduled to inform our service development in the coming months. We have updated our Family Hub pages and rebranded our Facebook page.

2.20 Representatives from the Department for Housing, Levelling Up and Communities recently visited Merton to hear about the transformation work across our Early Help system. With a focus on family voice, the development of the multi-agency workforce, community involvement, leadership and data maturity, the meeting allowed us to showcase our approach to Early Help in Merton, including the Supporting Families and Family Hub programmes. The DLUHC representatives provided us with helpful and positive feedback, and had a particular interest in our work around the development of the data lake (the 'Insights to Intervention' project) and our development of recording within our CSC database system.

Supporting Vulnerable Children

Supporting Vulnerable Children with Education, Health and Care Plans

- 2.21 As at the 31st October 2023, Merton maintained 2572 Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), an increase of 83 in comparison with the same time last year. The Service continues to maintain a smaller growth in the number of EHCPs it maintains from previous years due to the robust decision-making processes that have been implemented since 2022 and the work being undertaken in the Post 16 Team regarding ceasing.
- 2.22 In this calendar year (January to October 2023), the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Integrated Service (SENDIS) has received 339 requests for an Education Health and Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA), representing a small increase in comparison with the previous year.
- 2.23 The EHCNA process should be completed within 20 weeks. Over the course of the calendar year, and excluding exceptions, 60% of EHCNAs led to EHCPs being issued within the statutory 20 weeks. This is a decrease in timeliness in comparison with last year, but Merton performance remains above the latest national average (51%). As outlined last month this lower local performance is due to a combination of factors which include delays in receiving professional advice; challenging staffing issues across education, health and social care (mirroring a national issue); and the increase in demand for EHCNA's. The partnership continue to meet to discuss how the capacity issues will be addressed in order to ensure our timeliness improves.
- 2.24 Since January, 70 children and young people with an EHCP have moved into Merton and their plan has been adopted; a slightly greater number (124) moved out of the Borough.
- 2.25 The Local Authority has discontinued 321 EHC Plans since January 2023 including the 124 referenced above, where young people have moved out of the Borough.
- 2.26 Merton's first SEND Youth Advisory Forum took place in October. Young people from Cricket Green, Perseid and Melrose Schools (Whatley Campus) attended – a total of 16 young people attended, who were supported by staff

from each school. The group reviewed the SENDAP Strategy draft Vision Statement and gave their feedback on this. They supported the aspirations of the Strategy.

2.27 The Forum discussed their thoughts and feelings about Merton as a borough and agreed what areas of the borough required the most urgent action. The young people outlined a number of specific areas where improvement was required, some examples are identified below and further information will be collated as part of the wider work of the Youth Participation service and fed into decision making processes.

- Traffic and road layouts
- More communication supports within the local area shops and on transport services etc. such as Picture Exchange Communication Systems (PECS) Boards and IPad's.
- The group also discussed inclusivity as a priority across all areas including youth groups, gyms, transport, clubs, activities.

Safety Valve and Special School provision

2.28 The most recent monitoring return to the Department for Education was submitted on the 15th September. The DfE has reported back that they are satisfied with our progress and will continue to provide the agreed safety valve payments.

2.29 DfE announced approval 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 a trust to manage the school. To this end a competition application process was undertaken with the closing date on 4 November. There are two preferred trust providers and we will work with the DfE in assessing the bids although the final decision on the choice of provider rests with the DfE.

3 Stable Homes Built on Love (SHBoL) – Children's Pathfinder Wave 2

3.12 The DfE has now responded to the SHBoL consultations and are planning to publish renewed statutory guidance in December enabling some of the proposed changes to come into effect. Alongside this they have invited LA to bid for the 2nd round of Pathfinders to test their proposed changes to family help, child protection, and engaging family networks. We have submitted a bid to become a Pathfinder in consultation with our partners. The major changes is merging our statutory child in need provision with our early help services in the community which will better enable families to receive the right support, at the right time, in the right place. There is a strong focus on strengthening multi-agency arrangements across both early help and child protection with an aim to further embed whole family working across the entire system.

3.13 We have received funding through the Violence Reduction Unit for '*Gloves not Gunz*' to run in Pollards Hill. The service, which is based in Croydon, aims to

prevent and divert young people from crime, antisocial behaviour, exclusion from education and 'care' through building positive relationships, education, diversion activities and community cohesion. They specialise in using sport as a tool to engage and create change, we teach Boxing, Jiu Jitsu, Yoga & Fitness.

- 3.14 We ran our 2nd 'Take Over Day' during the half term when young people were invited to take on the responsibilities of a council officer as a form off work experience. The day was veery successful with positive feedback from the young people.