

Committee: Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Date: 25 January 2024

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 November we welcome two new heads of service.
- 2.2 We were sad to see the departure of Rachel Bowerman as head of School Improvement but her replacement, Clare Dudman, has already started. Clare comes with a wealth of senior experience, most recently in Gloucestershire and Lambeth.
- 2.3 Secondly, Jo Ross, the new permanent Head of Family Support and Safeguarding is due to start in Merton on 22 January. Jo comes with a lot of experience from her time holding similar positions in Wandsworth and Croydon. A big thank you goes out to Rorie Ovens and Kay Dove who have been acting up from their Service Manager positions to cover the vacancy since October.
- 2.4 The rest of this report highlights some of the Department's key activity since the last report in November 2023.

Joint Targeted Area Inspection

- 2.5 From 20 November to 8 December 2023 Merton received a Joint Targeted Area Inspection of our safeguarding partnerships response to Serious Youth Violence.

- 2.6 Inspectors fed back that they had seen a strong and effective partnership working to safeguard and support children affected by serious youth violence in Merton but have also highlighted some areas for improvement to help us strengthen this further and ensure a consistent multi-agency response to some of our most vulnerable children through their journey.
- 2.7 Our letter of findings will be published on 12th February 2024, after which we will respond with a plan of action on how we will keep working to improve our offer

Schools

School Ofsted inspections

- 2.8 The inquest into the death of headteacher Ruth Perry from Caversham Primary in Reading, concluded on the 7th December 2023, issuing a 'Prevention of Future Deaths Report'. This stated that the Ofsted inspection was a contributory factor in Mrs Perry's death. The coroner gave the inspectorate until the 7th February to respond in writing about the actions it will take to reduce the likelihood of a similar incident occurring. As a result of this ruling, schools were able to decline an Ofsted inspection during the last week of the autumn term. All inspections have been suspended until the 22nd January whilst inspectors have training in identifying signs of headteacher distress during inspections.
- 2.9 Since the start of this academic year, we have had four inspections in Merton, with one report published since the last committee. Cranmer Primary has been judged to be good.

School Attendance

- 2.7 Rates of school attendance in Merton continue to be better than national and outer London averages in primary and secondary schools, and in the Pupil Referral Unit. Autumn term indicative data shows Merton's attendance is improving but it is still approximately 2% below pre pandemic levels. Improving attendance remains 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.
- 2.8 Merton's plan to improve attendance is monitored by the Prevention & Early Intervention subgroup of the Merton Safeguarding Children Partnership. The subgroup has overseen a multi-agency attendance self-assessment. This self-assessment was scrutinised by a Department of Education Attendance Advisor who spent a whole day in Merton in November. Feedback from this visit highlighted many examples of best practise in how we are tackling this issue reflecting post-pandemic challenges. Feedback also reflected positively on the way we constantly challenge ourselves to achieve more. Follow up meetings have been undertaken with the Education Welfare Service and the Virtual School to look at how they work to support groups of vulnerable children.
- 2.9 We are developing an action plan to further reduce the number of lessons that children are missing and support children and families to thrive in school

Stanford Primary School

- 2.10 The Secretary of State has made the finalised decision to close Stanford Primary School at the end of the summer term (August 2024). The decision to seek permission from the Department for Education was taken by PACE Academy Trust due to a consistent and significant decrease in pupil numbers that has made the school financially unsustainable. The council understands this has been a very difficult decision by the Trust.
- 2.11 Merton Council has an important role in facilitating alternative school places for the children and we are determined to do all we can to make this transition as easy as possible for families. The council has been working closely with Stanford School and will continue to work with the school and parents to ensure alternative school places are made available for all pupils presently on roll. Stanford Primary School has an ARP (Additional Resource Provision for children with special educational needs). We have agreed with the governors of Liberty Primary School that they will open a new ARP for the start of term in September 2024 to ensure these children presently at Stanford Primary School can be offered a directly comparable school place.

Secondary school admissions

- 2.12 Secondary school offer day is 1 March 2024. Officers now have the preference information and, despite the cohort of children from primary schools being a lower number, we are seeing an increase in preferences to our secondary schools, reflecting the increased parental confidence in the quality of our secondary school. We therefore expect secondary numbers to remain at a stable high number for September 2024.

Early Years

- 2.13 National campaigns have been launched in the New Year to promote the new early education and childcare entitlements from April 2024. Parents must apply for their code via the HMRC this term, for securing their free place from April. This has been promoted via the resident email, through our own internal communications for staff, via the Family Hub Facebook page and via our professional networks. We will continue to promote during the roll out phase of the next 18 months.
- 2.14 In December we shared a childcare survey with residents, via the resident email, to gain views on the suitability and availability of childcare in Merton. Findings will be used to inform 2024 Sufficiency Assessment of the local childcare market and following on action plan.
- 2.15 In addition to the childcare survey for residents, we shared a survey with local early years providers to gain an understanding of their preparedness and ability to deliver the new entitlements. Findings of this survey will also inform the 2024 sufficiency assessment and action plan.

Early Help

- 2.16 The funding for the transformation programme for Family Hubs has now been extended until end of the summer term 2024. This means we can continue to embed and develop our approach, whilst planning for the cessation of the

programme from September. This will involve ensuring the legacy of the transformation through the ongoing reshaping of current arrangements so that we can deliver and sustain a Family Hub approach within local communities.

Supporting Vulnerable Children

Supporting Vulnerable Children with Education, Health and Care Plans

- 2.17 As at the 31st December 2023, Merton maintained 2563 Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), an increase of 92 in comparison with the same time last year. A smaller growth in the number of EHCPs the Local Authority maintains is being continued from previous years, as a result of the robust decision-making processes that have been implemented since 2022 and the work being undertaken in the Post 16 EHCP Team regarding ceasing plans where appropriate.
- 2.18 In this calendar year (January to December 2023), the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Integrated Service (SENDIS) has received 464 requests for an Education Health and Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA), representing a small increase in comparison with the previous year.
- 2.19 The EHCNA process should be completed within 20 weeks. Over the course of the calendar year, and excluding exceptions, 55% of EHCNAs were 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 in previous reports, 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. A robust action plan has been developed to address the factors impacting on timeliness.
- 2.20 In the calendar year 2023, 78 children and young people with an EHCP have moved into Merton and their plan has been adopted; a greater number (150) moved out of the Borough.
- 2.21 In the calendar year 2023 the Local Authority has discontinued 408 EHC Plans, including the 150 referenced above, where young people have moved out of the Borough.
- 2.22 The SEN Team are now undertaking data cleansing of all 2023 data in preparation for submitting the Government's SEN 2 Return which is the Special Educational Needs Survey submitted yearly by all Local Authorities to the Department for Education. SEN2 collects data about children for whom the local authority has responsibility for the management of the SEN processes, under the 1996 Education Act and the 2014 Children and Families Act. The information collected via the annual SEN2 survey form provides the major source of data collected on children and young people with Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans. It is the only source of data on the totality of EHC plans maintained by individual local authorities.

Safety Valve and Special School provision

- 2.23 The DfE has announced the High Needs budget allocations for 2024/25 – the uplift is only 2% compared to the previous year. This will make managing the High Needs budget more challenging next year than expected.
- 2.24 The DfE announced approval for the new special free school in Merton on 23rd August 2023. There are two preferred trust providers and we have been invited to participate in the interview process although the final decision on the choice of provider rests with the DfE. The agreement to a suitable site is still ongoing.

Children Social Care & Youth Inclusion.

- 2.25 Regarding the national reforms to Children’s Social Care (Stable Homes Built on Love) the DfE have published ‘Children’s Social Care National Framework’ which is statutory guidance setting out the purpose, principles for practice and expected outcomes of children’s social care. They have also published information on the indicators which will make up the new National Children’s Social Care Dashboard. They are holding briefings on the new guidance over the coming weeks and discussions will be held regionally and locally around what this guidance means for services locally and how we can start to adapt. Merton currently has a bid submitted to take part in the 2nd round of pathfinders which we will be notified of at the end of January.
- 2.26 Following a review of our In House Fostering Out of Hours Service, we have amended it to provide a better service to our foster carers. The most significant change is enabling fostering social workers to carry out visits to support foster homes in moments of crises which will provide greater stability to our children in care.
- 2.27 There were a number of events for care experienced young people leading up to the new year. To celebrate National Care Leavers week in November, staff took a group of care experienced young people out for a meal at Spice Village in Tooting, and for their festive celebration they went to Wimbledon Cinema to see the award-winning film – Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. Our foster carers also celebrated the festive season with their annual Christmas dinner at Merton Registry Office, which was a big success. The Metropolitan Police provided us with gifts to distribute to children in need and who are on child protection plan. These were then wrapped and delivered by social work teams. Christmas cards from staff and Councillors were also delivered to all Care Experienced Young people.

This page is intentionally left blank