

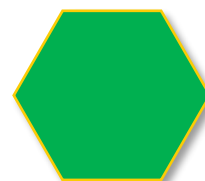
Early Help Strategy



Merton
Safeguarding
Children Partnership

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Introduction

Early Help means picking up on any problems as soon as possible so they don't get too big, and working alongside families to put things in place to help them get better. In Merton there are lots of different services that work together with children, young people and families providing 'Early Help' so that their needs are met.

We want to make sure children, young people and families in Merton can get the right help, in the right place, at the right time so that things do get better. We believe that Early Help is all about identifying family needs early, working together at the lowest possible level of need to address issues or problems before they get bigger and making sure families know how and where to get support if they need, mostly through the organisations already working with children like schools or health services

For many years, services in Merton have worked well together and many families have told us that the things we have done have really helped them.

We want to make sure that our services continue to help families and make sure that we always think about ways to make the support even better by working in partnership with the family.

The development of this strategy started in early 2020, prior to the 1st national lockdown as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the strategy developed, no one had anticipated that almost a year later we would be in a further lockdown, nor the impact that this would have on access to some of the most well used universal services such as health visiting and education services.

Ordinarily, most children and young people in Merton enjoy a good quality of life, have access to local services where their needs are met and they feel a sense of community. We are proud to have a variety of services that have continued to provide support and respond to challenges brought by the pandemic; however, we recognise the significant impact this has for some families who will not have been able to make full use of or have access to services within their local communities.

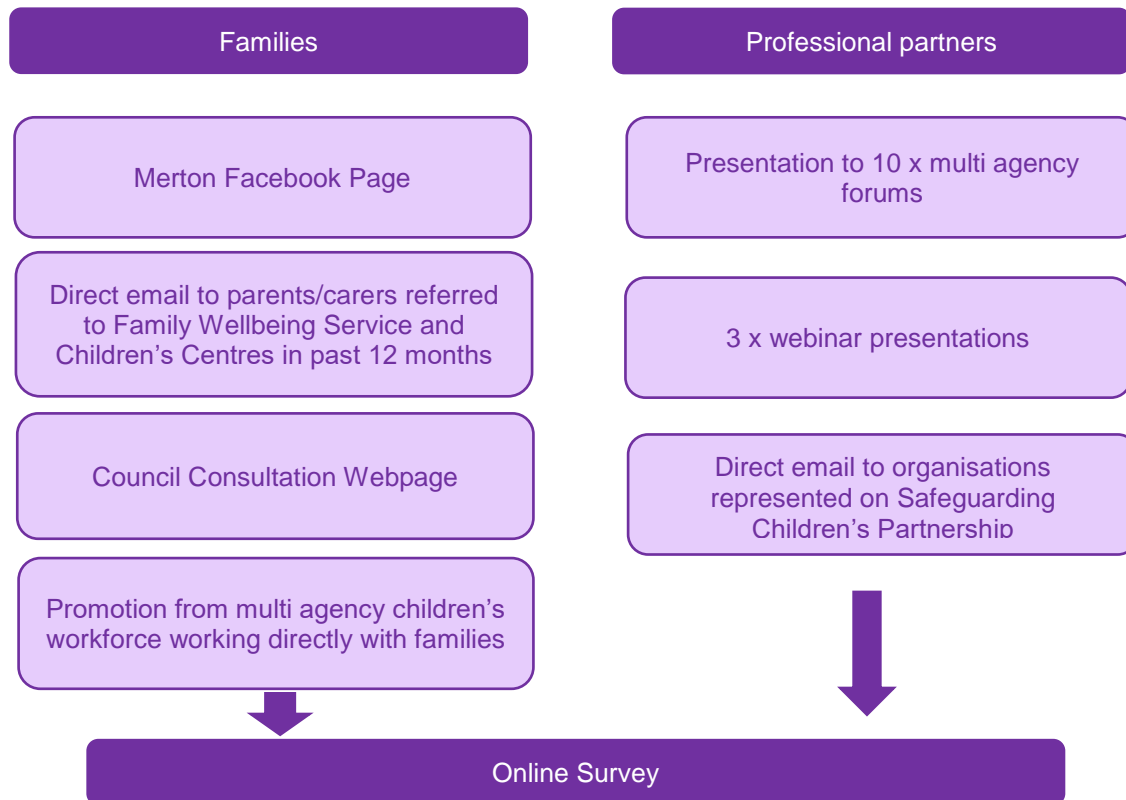
We are aware that for some families, particularly for those who would have ordinarily taken up universal and early help services such as new parents, new families in the area things have been difficult. The impact is likely to have been greater for children who have not been able to attend school and families where relationships have become strained and day to day routines more difficult (housing, financial, employment, domestic abuse, challenging behaviour, mental health, SEND)

Within this changing environment, it is now more important than ever, that we all work together to support all families, children and young people in the best way we can. We want to refresh our approach to Early Help, thinking more about how children, young people, families and communities build on their own strengths and access the support and services they have around them, guided by community members and staff they know well, as and when needed. We see this early help strategy as the key driver for enabling all children young people and families to receive the help they need, particularly through the focusing of resources and service development for the families who have been most effected by the impact of COVID-19

Community Engagement – Your Views

Between 2 March and 7 April service users and partners from across the children’s workforce in Merton were given the opportunity to comment and feedback on the draft Early Help Strategy. The draft strategy detailed proposals for Merton’s new approach to Early Help, identifying our priorities and explaining how we will work together across services and with families to support children to achieve positive outcomes.

Feedback on the strategy was invited via online survey / email response and was promoted via the following channels;



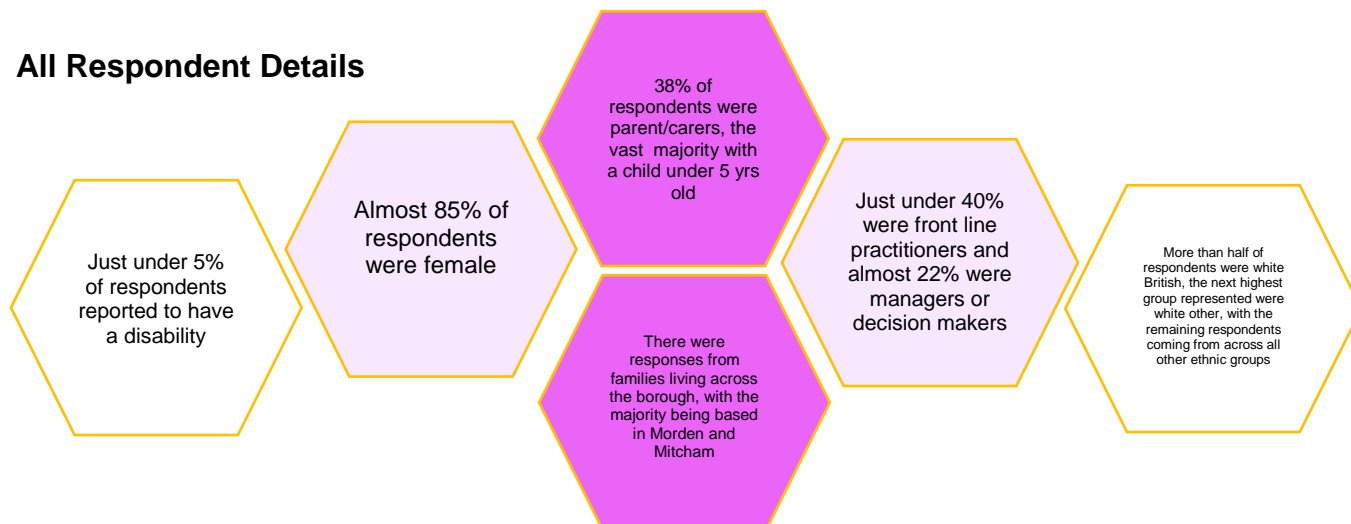
The following pages summarise the responses received, full details of responses can be found [here](#). In summary the feedback received is in support of our refreshed approach to early help and families and practitioners have shared many positive examples of early help effectively supporting families.

The feedback also identified the following areas for development;

- 1 Need for easily accessible and concise information on the range of support available and how to access, for both families and practitioners
- 2 Information and training on the Effective Support model and iThrive Framework for practitioners
- 3 Consideration to timeliness of service responses, with information on likely wait times for services if applicable

In order to ensure that all feedback is incorporated into our work going forward we will be producing an Effective Support for Families Action Plan.

All Respondent Details



Most families who responded sought support because they were new parents or because of issues relating to their child's development. This was followed by housing and child / young person's behavior

Family feedback

We asked families about their experiences of receiving the 'Right Help'

The vast majority of respondents shared very positive comments regarding their experiences of the support they received

We asked families about their experiences of receiving help at the 'Right Time'

The majority of respondents shared positive comments regarding their experiences of accessing support when they needed it, however some shared examples of having to wait to get responses or support from services

We asked families about their experiences of receiving help in the 'Right Place'

The majority of respondents shared positive comments regarding their experiences, though some told us that they didn't always know where to go to get support.

We asked families to share their views and experiences on the impact that COVID and the associated restrictions had on their family, broadly the feedback provided fell into the categories below

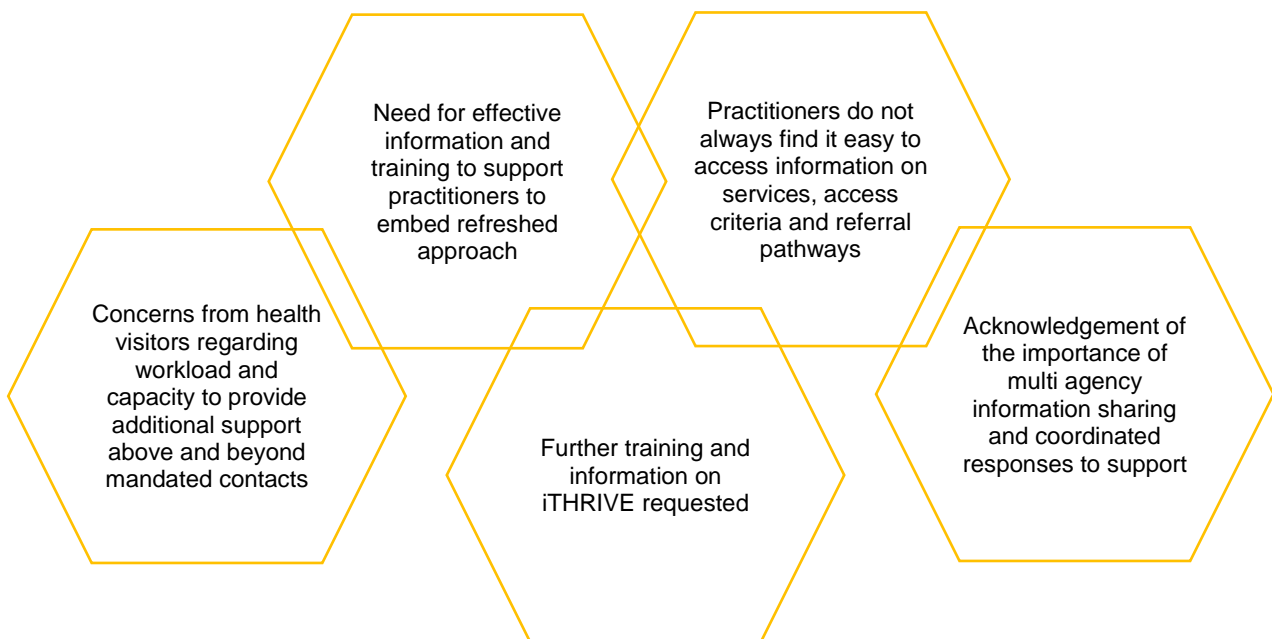
- Feeling socially isolated and unable to access support services
- Lost jobs and financially impacted
- Negative impact on family members mental health
- Difficulties managing children and young people behaviour

Practitioner feedback

We asked our partners if they felt that they could contribute to the achievement of our 3 priority areas, by supporting specific activities

Broadly over 80% of respondents felt that they could contribute to the activities within their role or in their organization and shared positive examples of how they are currently, or could further consider how to this in their role or organization.

Below are some of the key themes that were shared by practitioners



We asked practitioners for their feedback on our proposed Effective Support Model and Indicators of Need

61% of respondents said that they felt the new model and indicators of need better reflects our model and provides a helpful guide, 30% were not sure.

We asked practitioners if they felt that the Early Help Assessment tools with aid their work with families

On average 92% felt the tools would aid their work with families

We asked practitioners whether the online directories would aid their work with families

94% said they thought that they would aid their wor

Merton's Early Help Priorities

In Merton we want to make sure that all children can achieve well in the following areas of life:



Getting Involved and Having a Say

Children, young people and families to inform and shape the support they receive

Connecting with Family, Friends and Community

Connections in the community, building relationships with local people so that everyone knows how and where to get advice and support when they need it

We know that most children in Merton grow up and achieve well, and we want to make sure that this is the case for every child. We want to ensure that all children have these opportunities, despite the challenges faced as a result of COVID-19. Our Early Help Strategy is to understand what challenges and problems make achieving these outcomes more difficult for some children. Thinking about how we can build on strengths and opportunities within families, communities and services so that support at the lowest possible level of intervention to help all children belong, stay safe and thrive.

We know that in general, before and during COVID-19, there are certain groups of children and young people who are less likely to achieve in some of the areas and we are committed to targeting our services so that these particular groups are considered most in our strategy and plans.

We have reviewed lots of data and information to help us identify some of the main things that we need to be focusing on to make sure that every child in Merton can achieve in the areas in the diagram above.

What we know....

families know their children and young people better than anyone else

COVID – 19 had had a big impact on many people; affecting them accessing services, their relationships, financial stability and emotional wellbeing. Restrictions have made it challenging for some families to access services and support

the voice of the child and young person is sometimes secondary to the voices of others around them and children and young people's views are not always clearly reflected

nearly half of children in Merton who are classified as a 'Child in Need', are at risk due to neglect and / or abuse

a high number of requests to Children's Social Care do not meet the threshold for assessment or intervention

children / young people with a wide range of needs are referred for criminal exploitation to the Multiagency Risk, Vulnerability and Exploitation (MARVE) panel

not all children reach their expected child development levels by the age of 5 and this can mean it is harder for them to catch up by the ages of 11 and 16.

children and young people who actively participate in education are more likely to engage well in learning and meet their potential

children / young people who are not at a healthy weight are more likely to suffer health problems as they grow up and some families find it challenging to follow a healthy lifestyle

not all children and young people engage with child and adolescent mental health services

all family members are individual and that what has happened in the past can sometimes affect the present. We know that these experiences can have a big impact on their wellbeing

for families living in relative low income, this can have a big impact on children's life chances and getting off to a good start

we have a low number of young people who are not in education or employment (NEET), but for those that are NEET, becoming independent can be more challenging

transitions points (such as moving to secondary school / higher education and from children's to adult services) can be challenging for some children, often more so for those with a range of needs

Considering the key information above, we have identified, and we commit to working together to achieve the following three priority outcomes through delivery of our Early Help Strategy.

We will review these priorities to ensure they remain relevant in light of the COVID pandemic and its impact on family life an access to services

1

Not as many children and families require support from specialist services. Reduction in number of children in need

2

More babies / children meet the expected stage of development for their age

3

More children/young people attend school regularly and fewer are excluded

Our Ambition

We want Merton to be a place where children and young people:

Belong

Are safe

Can thrive

Our Vision

We have used evidence and information from local and national data to develop our vision. We want to achieve our ambition by using a refreshed approach to Early Help across the whole system so that in Merton we know that we have in place:

The Right Help, at The Right Time in The Right Place

Right Help

Work alongside all family members, helping them to think about their worries and come up with their own ideas and plans to make things better, building on their own family and community strengths.

Develop and train the children's workforce so that support is provided by staff who know the children and families best, everyone uses the same language, tools and approaches and everyone knows what to expect.

Right Time

Set things up so that problems are picked up early and support is put in place to help things get better, often through staff who know the children and their families best.

Work together to provide support to children, young people and their families at the lowest level possible in accordance with their needs.

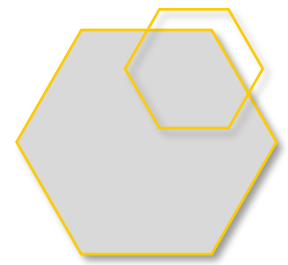
Right Place

Support connections in the community, building relationships with local people so that everyone knows how and where to get advice and support when they need it and how to access services and support in their local area, from staff that they know already

Our Approach - The System

We see Early Help as an approach or a system and not a response to a family need by a single service. Our refreshed approach is one of more shared working together across the community of services, based upon evidence of what works and strong use of data and information sharing to inform our decisions. Our strategy commits everyone to developing and investing in this approach so that our ambition and vision can be achieved.





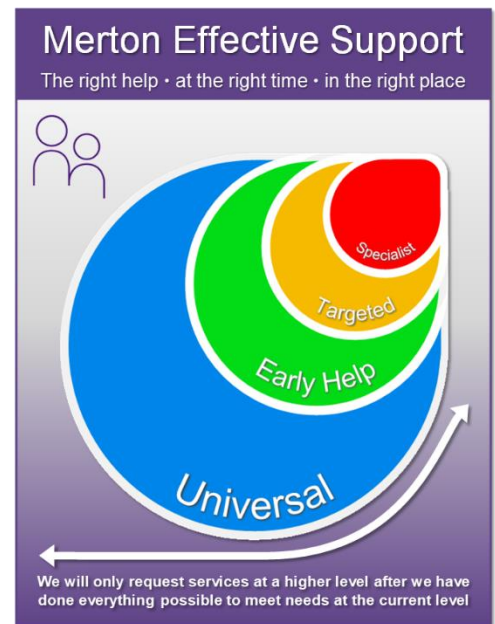
Our Approach - Continuum of Need

Children and Young people can be at different levels of needs for education, health and care and can move between these levels as their needs change. The child's journey through all levels of need is one that all agency partners wish to ensure is as smooth and time limited as possible, supporting our 'right help, at the right time and in the right place' approach.

In Merton we have the definitions of need shown in the Merton Effective Support Diagram

This conceptual model is a way of developing a shared understanding and explaining the Merton approach across all our services and partnerships, ensuring a consistent approach is applied by all practitioners and managers, including commissioners. The model illustrates how we respond to the requirements of children and families across four levels of need

In this model, all services and interventions seek to work openly with the family (or with young people on their own where it is age-appropriate) in order to support them to address their needs at the lowest possible level. We agree to actively work with children and families to prevent their needs escalating to a higher level.



Thrive framework and i-Thrive delivery

The Thrive model is a national framework that thinks about the mental health and wellbeing needs of children, young people and families through five different needs based groupings as shown in this image.

It places importance on the prevention and promotion of mental health and wellbeing across the whole population.

The framework supports children, young people and families to make decisions and informed choices about the support and care they can receive and the groupings help to organise the different options that are available depending on what people feel at that point in time.

We have aligned this framework to our Effective Support Model;



- 1- Thriving / Getting Advice
- 2- Getting Help
- 3- Getting More Help
- 4- Getting Risk Support

Our Approach – Guiding Principles

We believe that to build an effective Early Help system, all services working together should be guided by a shared set of principles. In Merton we:

- ✓ Understand that Early Help is everyone's responsibility
- ✓ We will work flexibly together and collaboratively in times of uncertainty
- ✓ Work together to provide support to children, young people and their families at the lowest level possible in accordance with their needs.
- ✓ Always listen to children, young people and families
- ✓ Invest in relationships
- ✓ Put the child at the heart of our work
- ✓ Maximise opportunities presented through digitalization (data and information sharing)
- ✓ Recognise children as part of a wider network of family, peers and community
- ✓ Focus on individual and family strengths and community assets
- ✓ Value the significance of the child's first 1000 days in improving life chances
- ✓ Base everything we do on evidence and what works
- ✓ Use our resources wisely and carefully, so that those with the most need are first in our planning
- ✓ Stop and review things if they are not working



Our Approach – Practice Model

In Merton we want all those working with families to have a shared approach to working with families. In order to do this we have adopted a **Systemic, relationship based approach**.

Key elements of the Practice Framework:

The underlying principle behind systemic practice is the ability for those working with families, to build open, honest and strong relationships, and to be able to develop a level of trust which will help them to create real and sustainable change, understanding that individuals are part of a wider context and considering this when working to identify goals and how to achieve them

How the Practice Framework is being used:

The Practice Framework is used throughout our system, including:

- ✓ Discussions with families
- ✓ Early Help Assessments and Family Plans
- ✓ Team Around the Family Networks
- ✓ Supervision

Next Steps



Merton's Effective Support for Families Guidance

We will develop a guidance document to support all practitioners working with families in Merton to understand our approach, giving them helpful tools to aid their work. This will include:

- ✓ New Effective Support Model
- ✓ Refreshed multi agency indicators of need (threshold document)
- ✓ New Early Help Assessment and planning tools with guidance
- ✓ Templates and guidance to use when working alongside families
- ✓ Best practice guidance on Team Around the Family networks

New Front Door and Request for Service (Children and Families' Hub)

We will redesign our pathways for access to some Early Help services and social work support for children young, young people and families

Multi Agency Training

We will develop a range of modules to support the implementation of our refreshed approach to Early Help. This will include modules on:

- ✓ New Effective Support Model
- ✓ Practice Model and Framework
- ✓ Team Around the Family / Whole Family Approach

We will explore the possibility of developing accredited training

We will support volunteers in the work so they too are skilled and trained, building capacity in communities

Online Tools and Information

We will refresh our online information, so that it is accessible and easy to use for both families and practitioners

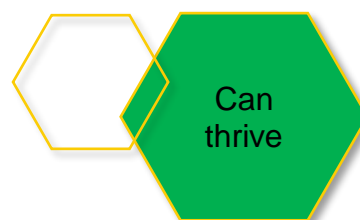
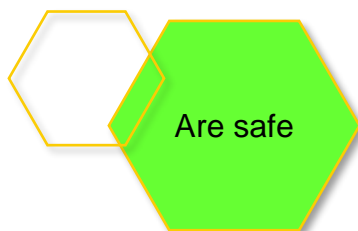
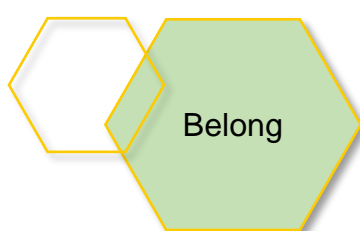
How will we monitor our progress?

Merton's Safeguarding Children Partnership are responsible for monitoring the refreshed approach to Early Help. The Partnership will receive regular reports which will include a review of the data and listen to feedback from children, young people and families, which will show how well we are doing.

We have identified a number of measures linked to each priority area that we will be using to allow us to understand how well our refreshed approach to Early Help is working and the impact it is having on Merton's children and young people; these are illustrated by the models on the following pages.

It is recognised that our refreshed approach to Early Help, has been developed during unprecedented times, causing uncertainty for everyone with restricted access to every day services such as schools, health visiting and local community services that provide ongoing support and safety for children, young people and their families. Therefore, the monitoring of our progress is really important to ensuring that our priorities and outcomes remain relevant

Our approach and commitment to early help will maximise the range of opportunities that are available to us, so that we continue to support families who have the most to gain from accessing the range of services and support. To this end we will work collaboratively and collectively so our priorities can be achieved together, so that all children and young people:



The full impact of the pandemic on children and family outcomes is not yet known, however, it is anticipated that there is likely to be a widening of the gap, across all children's outcomes, between children living in deprivation with multiple needs and those that do not.

This strategy is a commitment from everyone within our early help system to work address inequalities for the children, young people and families in Merton.

Priority Area 1

Not as many children and families require support from specialist services
Reduction in number of children in need

Outcomes

(What we will measure over the strategy period)

Number of Children classified as 'In Need'
% of requests for service to the single point of contact that do not meet threshold

Embed the systemic, relationship based Early Help Practice Model

Embed the team around the family approach, so families are supported by people that they know best

Promotion and awareness of the range of services available to children and families across all levels of need to prevent escalation

Activity

Practitioners to use early help tools that aid work with families
(Effective Support Model and indicators of need, early help plan and targeted early help assessment)

Prioritise access to early help support for those families where the impact of COVID is likely to have been greater (housing, financial, employment, domestic abuse, challenging behaviour, mental health, SEND)

Priority Area 2

More babies/children meet the expected stage of development for their age

Outcomes

(What we will measure over the strategy period)

% gap between Free School Meals and non-Free School Meals eligible children who achieve a 'good level of development' at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage

% of disadvantaged families who take up free childcare offers

Promote and support take up of universal provision for babies and young children; ante/post-natal support, mandated health reviews, libraries, community play / social groups and early education

Make sure our work promotes healthy child development and healthy lifestyle choices

Provide a range of early help services that support the development of babies and young children who have been denied opportunities due to COVID-19

Activity

When early childhood developmental needs are identified, make the best use of appropriate early help services

Raise awareness of the importance of the first 1001 days

Priority Area 3

More children and young people attend school regularly and fewer are excluded

Outcomes

(What we will measure over the strategy period)

Merton children and young people who are persistent absentees

Merton children/young people of secondary school age who are excluded

Promote the importance of school attendance, with consideration to those who may find this harder following the COVID pandemic

Ensure that parents and carers of children and young people where school attendance may be a concern are supported

Embed the iTHRIVE approach to promote children and young people's emotional wellbeing across the children's workforce

Activity

Ensure that transitions are well planned and managed

Promote take up of services to support children and young people at risk of exclusion and their families, both in and out of school

Equalities Impact

The Public Sector Equality Duty

1. The Equality Act 2010 identifies the following as protected characteristics for the public sector equality duty:
 - Age
 - Disability
 - Gender Reassignment
 - Pregnancy and Maternity
 - Race (including ethnicity)
 - Religion or belief
 - Sex
 - Sexual orientation
 - Marriage / Civic Partnerships
2. Under Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, the Secretary of State is under a duty to have due regard to the need to:
 - a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Equality Act 2010;
 - b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it, in particular the need to:
 - remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by persons who share a relevant protected characteristic that are connected to that characteristic;
 - take steps to meet the needs of persons who share a relevant protected characteristic that are different from the needs of persons who do not share it;
 - encourage persons who share a relevant protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity in which participation by such persons is disproportionately low.
 - c. foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it, in particular the need to:
 - tackle prejudice, and
 - promote understanding.

We will consider, pursuant to the public sector equality duty, the potential impact of these proposals. The Equality Act 2010 identifies eight protected characteristics, as set out in paragraph 1.

We have no evidence to suggest there would be a negative impact on those with other protected characteristics. We welcome stakeholder feedback on this topic.



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