

Looked After Children Strategy 2015-18

London Borough of Merton

Issue Date	Author	Date Of the Next Review	Lead Officer
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Our Mission Statement

We have a longstanding approach to preventing children becoming looked after. When children do need to come into care we seek to ensure that care proceedings are timely and our care plans appropriately safeguard children and support decisions around permanency which are in the best interest of each child.

We are committed to ensuring all our looked after children and young people are given every opportunity to experience a safe, healthy and happy life in which they achieve their potential. We will make every effort to ensure they are able to grow up in a stable and supportive environment with a sense of belonging. We will make available the widest range of placements in order to support the individual needs of our looked after children and where they can feel cared for and cared about.

Our role as corporate parents is significant and far reaching and we will exercise this with commitment and accountability across all areas of the council and partnership. Through this we will consistently ensure all our young people reach their potential, develop into independent, self-confident adults and enjoy their place in society.

We will ensure high expectations for our looked after children are shared widely and wholeheartedly. By involving our partners we will ensure coordinated wrap-around services are provided so that our children maintain healthy development, are safe both in and out of the home, achieving at school, involved in out-of school activities, whilst developing their sense of independence.

Our looked after children are the best experts we have and we value their experiences. At every stage of planning, service delivery or change we will listen to what looked after children and young people say and act accordingly.

Merton's services for looked after children form part of a comprehensive continuum of support for children and young people who may be facing difficulties at home. These range from family support to intensive community interventions or seeking permanence through permanent alternative care. In taking this approach we will remain committed to ensuring that the right children enter care and that their experiences are positive and their opportunities many.

Our strategic priorities

1. Improving the **timeliness of care proceedings**
2. Improving **placement stability and choice**
3. Improving **educational outcomes** for Looked After Children
4. Supporting good **health outcomes** for Looked After Children
5. Encouraging **participation and positive activities**
6. Understanding the needs of and supporting **LAC in particular circumstance**
7. **Achieving permanency**
8. Supporting our **Care leavers**

LAC and Care Leavers Pledge

MERTON COUNCIL

A pledge to children in care and care leavers in Merton

We promise to support you to:

Be healthy

- Ensure you are registered with a GP and Dentist
- Ensure all your medical, dental or other health needs are met
- Respect the culture, traditions, language, and religion of all children and young people in care
- Promote your emotional well-being (including mental health and resilience) and remain in contact with your family
- Help you to maintain your personal hygiene and look after yourself
- Provide services and support if you are a parent
- Provide support and information for you on drug and alcohol misuse.

Enjoy and achieve

- Ensure you have access to the best possible education and training
- Make sure we do what your Personal Education Plan says we are supposed to do
- Support you to attend and do well at school/college or university
- Make sure you get extra study support if you need it
- Make sure you have access to IT and other equipment needed to support your education and training
- Arrange meetings that, where possible, avoid you having to come out of class
- Expect your carers to take an active interest in your education and homework and meet your teachers
- Help you get involved in leisure/cultural activities for enjoyment and having fun
- Believe in you and what you can achieve and have high aspirations for you
- Provide accommodation for you during the holiday times when you are at university
- Provide information on the financial support that you are entitled to, to help you learn or study.

Achieve economic well-being / Support for your future

- Celebrate your achievements
- Develop your life skills/help you work towards your goals
- Encourage, support and help you prepare to leave care, live independently, and achieve your full potential
- Ensure that you are aware of your financial entitlements as a child in care or care leaver from Merton Social Care
- Ensure that the whole local authority recognises its responsibilities to you as your corporate parent by providing you with a range of opportunities
- Involve you in the development and the delivery of our services to you
- Provide you with good quality and stable accommodation
- Provide access to information relating to welfare benefits, budgeting and saving.

Stay safe / feel supported

- Enable you to take reasonable risks in a safe and supportive environment
- Be on time for meetings, and let you know if we are running late
- Provide a safe environment, where you will feel supported
- Make sure you have an independent reviewing officer to help plan with you what you need and to ensure these plans are carried out
- Give you advice and support to help you to stay safe
- Give careful thought to where you live so that you live in a home that feels like a home, with a carer who really cares and with a social worker, who together make sure they do things for you to keep you safe and well
- Explain why we cannot always provide you with everything that you want
- Provide access to support networks
- Provide you with an independent advocate.

Make a positive contribution / Make a difference

- Encourage you to have confidence to speak out, be heard and treated with respect
- Support you to have your say in meetings
- Aim to make your time in care less stressful, make a difference and try to help with your problems
- Encourage you to give us feedback and when necessary to support you to make a complaint
- Ensure that we feed back to you on the issues that you raise
- Involve you in planning your review so that you feel part of it
- Ensure that we establish, support and work in partnership with the Children in Care Council
- Ensure that you participate fully in your care and pathway planning
- Involve you in the recruitment and selection of foster carers and staff
- Provide opportunities for you to be involved in peer mentoring
- Support your development as an individual by helping you with passport, bank accounts, becoming a citizen, national insurance number, birth certificate, provisional driver's licence and immigration status
- Ensure that you understand our commitment to you, that all young people receive a service that values diversity, promotes fairness and challenges discrimination.

Leaving care

- We will trust and respect you
- Encourage your carer to teach you how to budget, cook and learn the skills you need to live independently
- Make sure you have your own worker to make a pathway plan with you
- Make sure that you can access support and guidance regarding your financial entitlements
- Stay in touch until you are 21, or sometimes up to 25 if in full time education.

Yvette Stanley
Director of Children, Schools and Families

Councillor Maxi Martin
Cabinet Member for Children's Services

Children in Care Council members



The National and Local Context

Under the Children Act 1989, a child is legally defined as 'looked after' by a local authority if he or she:

- is provided with accommodation for a continuous period for more than 24 hours
- is subject to a care order; or
- is subject to a placement order

A looked after child ceases to be looked after when he or she turns 18 years old. On reaching his or her 18th birthday, the status of the child changes from being looked after to being a young adult eligible for help and assistance from the local authority as a care leaver.

Children and young people achieve their best outcomes when provided with security, stability and love throughout their childhood and beyond. The majority of looked after children return home to their families after a short period of time in the care of the local authority. The underpinning principle of the Children Act 1989 places a legal duty on local authorities to support families to stay together when this is a safe and realistic option.

The National Context

Nationally there were 68,840 looked after children as at 31 March 2014, an increase of 7% compared to 31 March 2010. The number of looked after children has increased steadily over the past five years and it is now higher than at any point since 1985. Nationally the rate of looked after children per 10,000 is 60. At local authority level the rate varies significantly.

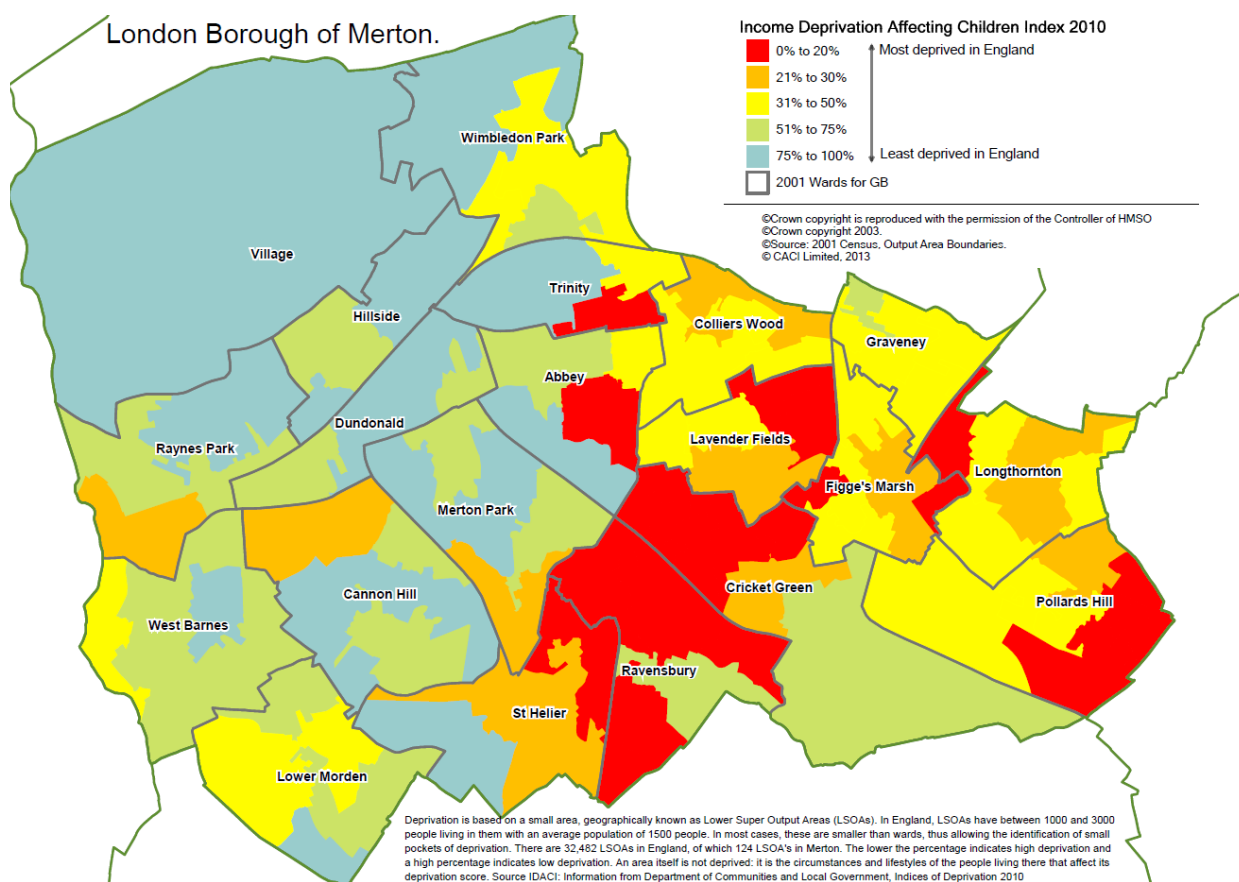
The majority of looked after children – 62% in 2014 - are provided with a service due to abuse or neglect. The reasons why looked after children are provided with a service have been relatively stable since 2010. The age profile of children looked after has been relatively stable since 2010. The largest age group is 10 to 15 year olds, which made up 37% of looked after children at 31 March 2014. There has been a slight increase in the percentage of 5 to 9 year olds, from 17% in 2010, to 20% in 2014. These trends are in line with the age breakdown of all children. The majority of children looked after at 31 March 2014 (74%) are from a White British background, the same proportion as the general population of all children. The ethnic breakdown for children looked after has varied little since 2010

The Government has been clear in its drive to improve services and outcomes for looked after children in all types of permanence care, with revised statutory guidance that clearly sets out the need to address the problem of delays for example within the adoption system. It is apparent for all professionals working within children's social care that the current court processes are contributing to the delays encountered by children and as a result the Family Justice Review has reviewed the Public Law Outline with a programme that aims to dramatically speed up care proceedings, including a time limit of 26 weeks within which all but exceptional cases must be completed.

The Local Context – 'Merton the place'

Merton is an outer London borough situated in south west London, covering 14.7 square miles. Merton has a total population of 200,543 including 47,499 children and young people aged 0-19 (Census 2011). The number of 0-19 year olds is forecast to increase by 3,180 (7%) by 2017, within which we forecast a 20% increase of children aged 5 to 9 (2,270). We have a younger population than the England average and have seen a 39% net increase of births over the last ten years (2,535 births in 2002 rising to 3,521 in 2010). The birth rate reduced in 2012/13 and again slightly in 2013/14 suggesting that the rate is stabilising. However the last ten years alongside other demographic factors has placed additional demand on all children's services.

Predominantly suburban in character, Merton is divided into 20 wards and has three main town centres; Wimbledon, Mitcham and Morden. A characteristic of the borough is the difference between the more deprived east (Mitcham/Morden) and the more affluent west (Wimbledon). There are a number of pockets of deprivation within the borough mainly in the eastern wards and some smaller pockets in the central wards. These wards have multiple deprivation, with high scores on income deprivation, unemployment and limited educational attainment. Merton has 39 Super Output Areas which are amongst the 30% most deprived areas across England for children. This means 45% of Merton school pupils are living in an area of deprivation (30% most deprived, IDACI 2010). Since 2010 we have seen an increase of 23% of children who are eligible for free school meals (2010, 2881 FSM children, 2014, 3548 FSM children).

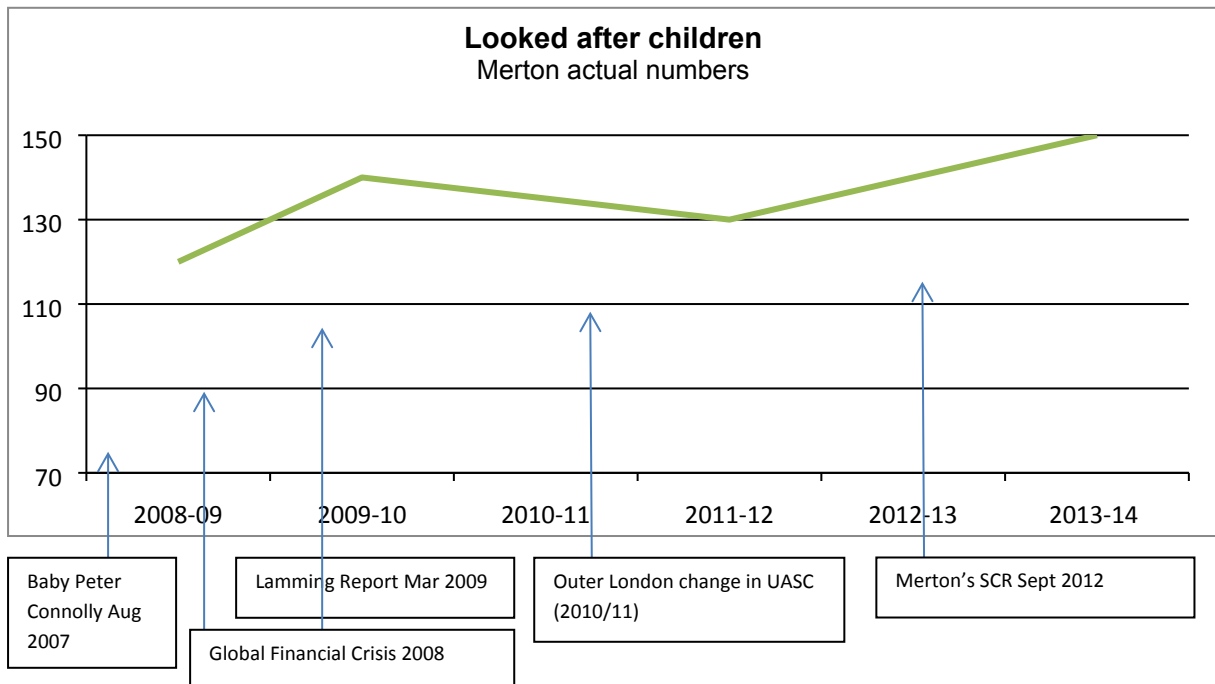


Thirty five per cent of Merton’s total population is Black, Asian or Minority ethnic (BAME) this is expected to increase further to 39% by 2017. Pupils in Merton schools are more diverse still, with 66% from BAME communities, speaking over 120 languages (2014). The borough has concentrations of Urdu speaking communities, Sri Lankan, South African and Polish residents.

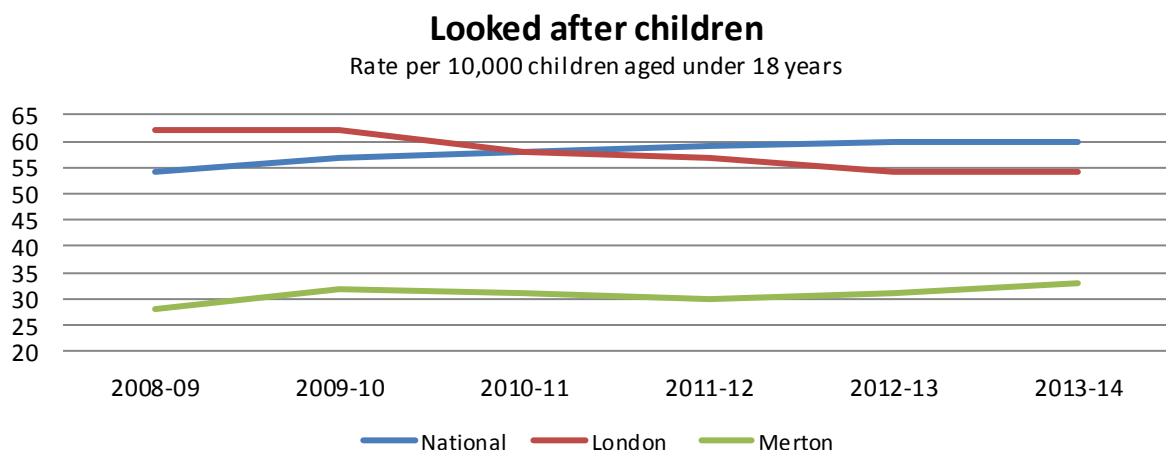
The number of children with Statements and School Action Plus pupils in Merton schools is also rising. Numbers of SEN Statements in Primary schools has risen from 255 in Jan 2011 to 310 in Jan 2014 (+22%), numbers of SEN Statements in Secondary schools has risen from 212 in Jan 2011 to 224 in Jan 2014 (+6%) and the number of SEN Statements in Special schools has risen from 249 in Jan 2011 to 321 in Jan 2014 (+29%).

Merton's Looked After Children

Merton's looked after children population in the last ten years has ranged from a low of 96 (2006/7) to 150 (2013/14). This increase has been reviewed and audited to establish what is behind this trend. There are a number of reasons for this increase including increased national awareness of children's safeguarding, an increasing birth rate, more general demographic changes and a change in legislation in relation to children coming into care through remand placements. Merton has a higher than average profile of looked after children at the older age range, including a significant increase in the numbers of Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers and an increase in young people coming into care through the Southwark Judgement.



Merton's LAC rate per 10,000 in March 2014 was 33, this remains within the range of our statistical neighbours (Redbridge, Sutton, Barnet, Kingston, Enfield, Ealing). London's LAC rate per 10,000 ranges from the low 40s to the high 60s.

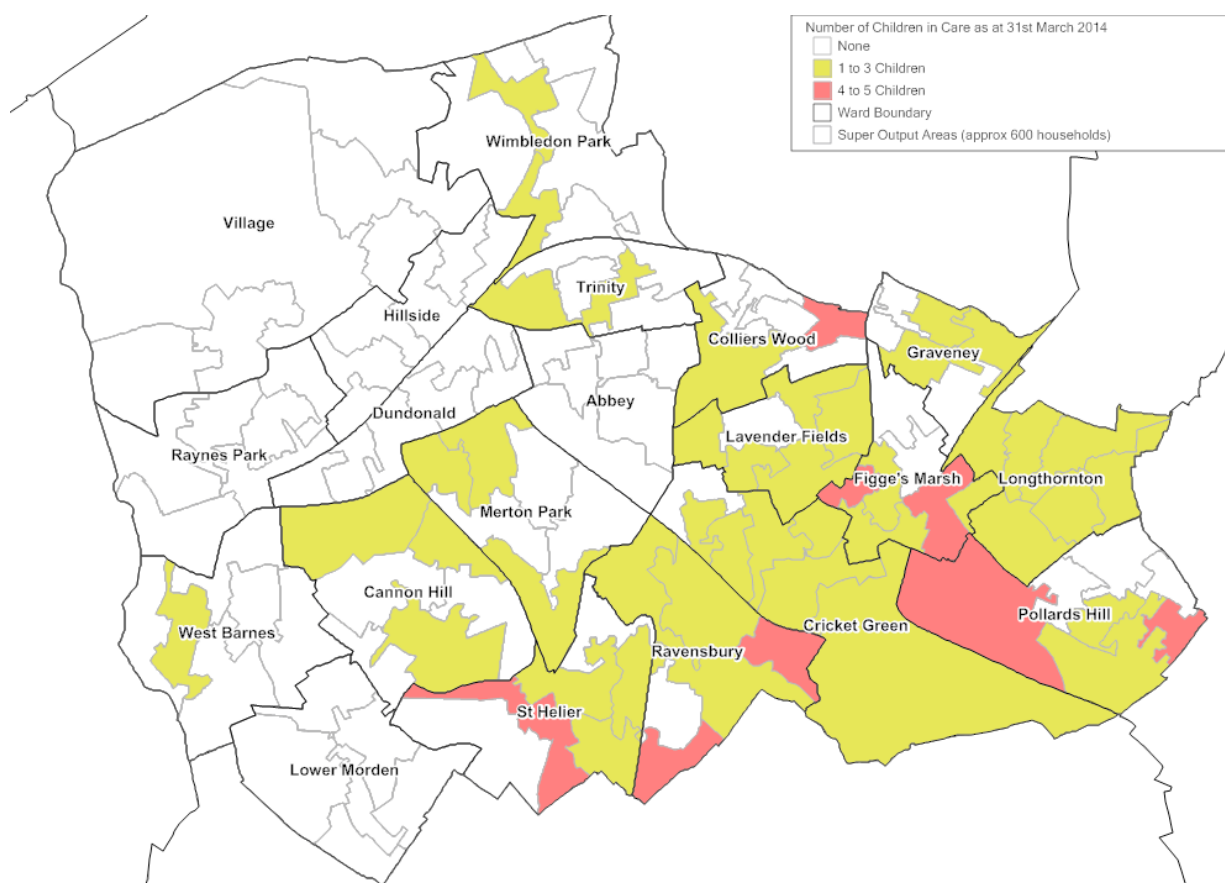


Merton's LAC gender distributions are similar to national averages; we have more LAC boys than girls. The age profile of children looked after at 31 March in Merton varies from the national norm with Merton caring for a large number of older looked after children aged 16 and over. In Merton 41% of our looked after children are aged 16 and 17 compared to 21% nationally.

Merton has a changing profile of ethnic groups for LAC. The majority of children looked after in Merton are from a white background, this is lower than the general resident population (18%). There are fewer Asian or Asian British than the all persons Merton population also. Mixed ethnic backgrounds, Black or Black British heritage and 'other ethnic groups' have looked after children proportions greater than the resident population. We continue to report an increase in the category of 'other ethnic groups' in 2013 and 2014 circa 80% were known to the authority as Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children.

The borough map below represents our looked after children's residents prior to being looked after, 60% of the 2014 LAC population came from an area of deprivation (Indices of Deprivation Affecting Children Index bottom 30%), an increase of 9% from 2013. The majority of children looked after as at 31 March 2014 lived in wards, pre intervention, in the east and south of the borough.

This map shows by ward the home address of Children Looked After at the 31st March 2014



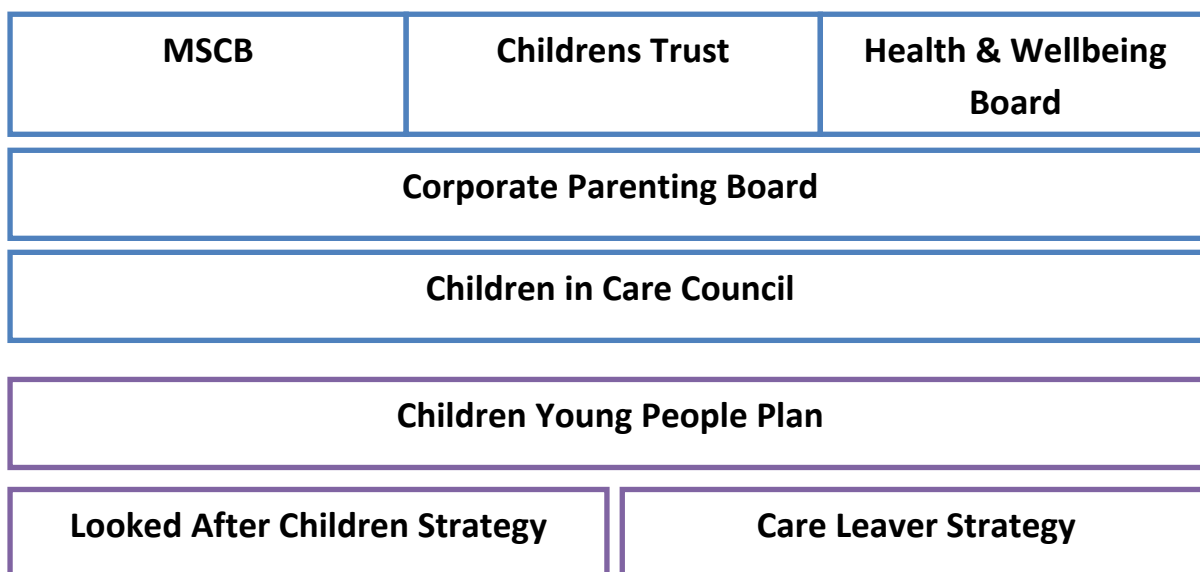
Our children have a range of complex needs at the point they become looked after 19% (2014) have SEN statements. Significant numbers of our LAC have experienced mental health and drugs or alcohol abuse issues within their families.

Clearly the decision to accommodate a child or young person is a momentous and life changing event and should only happen with due consideration of all the alternatives and with the needs of the child or young person at the forefront of our consideration. We support the view that children's needs are best met within their own families. To support such reflection and decision making Merton has set up an 'Edge of Care' Panel to ensure that the any decision to accommodate a child or young person between the ages of 0-16 is rigorously reviewed.

Merton’s Strategic Framework and Governance

This Looked After Childrens Strategy is not a stand-alone publication. Our Children and Young People’s Plan sets out our ambitions for our looked after children and this is enhanced by this LAC Strategy and our Care Leavers strategy, which are both endorsed and by the Children’s Trust, the Merton Safeguarding Children’s Board and the Corporate Parenting Board.

The Corporate Parenting Board is comprised of senior managers and officers from education, health, housing, social care and elected members this chaired by the Chief Executive London Borough Merton, ensuring a high level of scrutiny and cross directorate responsibility for delivery of our priorities.



Our Corporate Parenting responsibilities

The Children Act 1989 and the Leaving Care Act 2000 place clear statutory duties upon the Council to protect children from suffering significant harm and to provide continued financial and transition support to care leavers aged up to 21 (or 25 if in full time education).

When a child comes into care, the council becomes the Corporate Parent. Put simply, the term ‘Corporate Parent’ means the collective responsibility of the council, elected members, employees, and partner agencies, for providing the best possible care and safeguarding for the children who are looked after by the council. A child in the care of the council looks to the whole council to be the best parent it can be to that child. Every member and employee of the council has the statutory responsibility to act for and for that child in the same way that a good parent would act for and for their child.

Effective corporate parenting requires knowledge and awareness of the needs of children and young people who are looked after and the services that they receive. This is a shared responsibility for the Council as a whole. The role of the corporate parent is to,

- a. To receive and consider accurate and timely management information reports on the numbers, characteristics and needs of looked after children and care leavers
- b. To receive and consider reports demonstrating how effectively Merton is serving it’s looked after population through the provision of services and targeted initiatives

- c. To receive briefings on new national and local initiatives designed to improve children and young people's life chances
- d. To gain knowledge of services based on direct involvement and opportunities to meet and gain the views of stakeholders, especially listening to the views of children and young people looked after and members of the Children in Care Council
- e. To monitor and review progress on the delivery of the Pledge to children looked after and care leavers
- f. Ensure that decisive action is taken to address any shortcomings in the services provided to children and young people

The Children in Care Council directly supports the Corporate Parenting Board to measure and monitor the effectiveness and quality of 'Corporate Parenting' in Merton. The group meet on a monthly basis, they have a Chair and each member of the CICC has a lead area (e.g. complaints and housing). The group meet regularly with senior managers to discuss important issues affecting children and young people in care. The CICC have a standing agenda item at Corporate Parenting Board Meetings and a young person attends the Corporate Parenting Board.

Priority 1: Timeliness of care proceedings

The National context

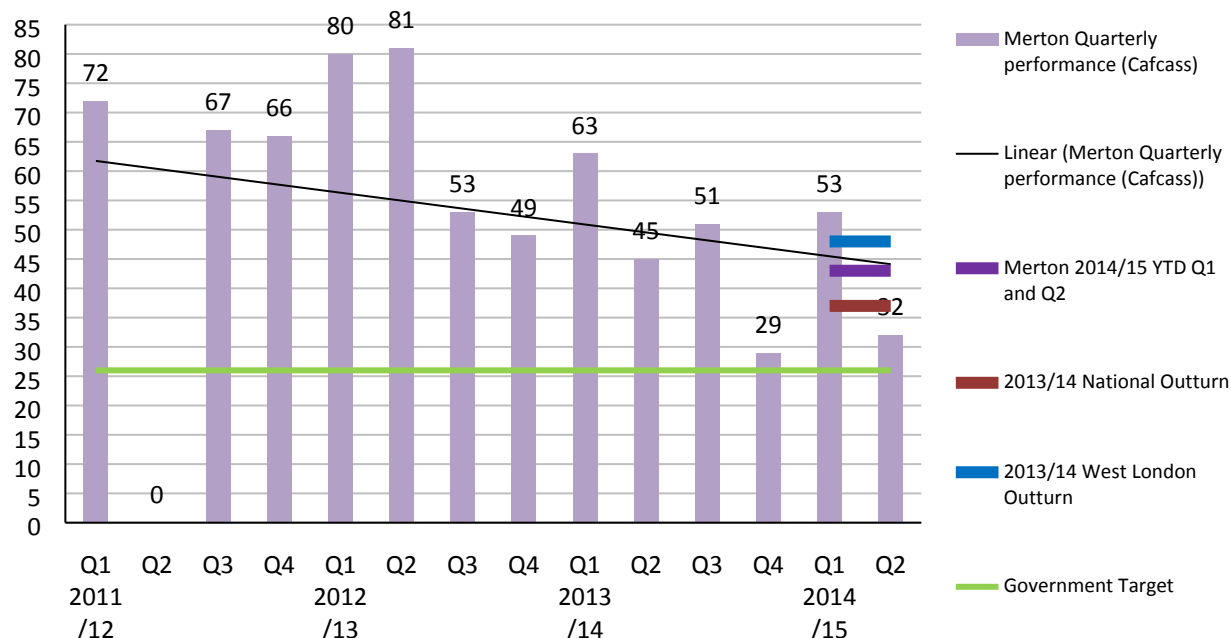
A revised Public Law Outline introduced in April 2014 set out streamlined case management procedures for dealing with public law children's cases. Its aim was to identify and focus on the key issues for children to making the best decisions for them within the timetable set by the Court, and avoiding the need for unnecessary evidence or hearings. Under the revised section 32(1) (a) of the Children Act 1989 (introduced by section 14 of the Children and Families Act 2014), care and supervision proceedings must be completed 'without delay, and, in any event, within twenty-six weeks beginning with the day on which the application was issued'. This places an increased emphasis on pre-proceedings work and the quality of assessments. The national average performance benchmark as at the end of 2013/14 is 33 weeks (National annual average 2013/14, CAFCASS).

Merton's track record

During 2013 we redesigned our looked after children and permanency services to deliver permanency more quickly and accommodate the requirements of the Family Justice Review and Children and Families Bill.

Merton's Case Progression Team was formed in June 2013 which aimed to reduce delay and establish a timescale for care proceedings cases to conclude in 26 weeks. There are clear thresholds for admitting children into care, in all cases significant attempts are made to support our children or young people to remain within their family or community.

Merton Care application - Quarterly performance average duration (Cafcass)



We have seen progress in the timeliness of our court proceedings from 72 weeks in 2011/12 to 32 weeks in 2014/15 (Merton 2014/15 Q2, CAFCASS). It should be noted however that small cohorts of children can significantly impact performance.

Merton's commitment moving forward

1. We will retain a dedicated 'Case progression function' within the department to pre-empt challenges and thus supports the timeliness of court proceedings.
2. We will shift our focus to pre-proceedings by developing clear processes which ensure that as much activity as possible is front loaded. This includes robust care planning, the coordination of viability assessments, expert assessments and parenting assessments. The challenge is to ensure services are joined up and there is close, integrated working across key teams.
3. We will continue to track cases from the 'notice of intention' stage to avoid unnecessary drift.
4. We will continue to review cases which go over 26 weeks to ensure that lessons are learnt and practice improved.

Impact measure

- A. Care application average duration (national target 26 weeks) (CAFCASS). (32 weeks in Q2 2014/15)

Priority 2: Placement stability and choice

The National context

Providing stability relies on identifying the right placement for a child early in their care journey whilst ensuring that individual and family needs are properly assessed and support services provided in order to achieve early permanence.

Local authorities should provide a range of placement options to ensure that the right placement is available for every child. For many children returning home to their family after a period in care will be the route to permanence and stability. For others, returning to other family or friends under a formal or informal arrangement will be the setting they need in order to thrive. Remaining in care with a long term foster family or finding a new permanent family through adoption, special guardianship or residence orders are other routes to permanence.

While it is evident that achieving timely permanence is desirable, nationally annual data returns show that a small but substantial number of children still experience multiple placements each year.

Merton's track record

Clearly the decision to accommodate a child or young person is a momentous and life changing event and should only happen with due consideration of all the alternatives and with the needs of the child or young person at the forefront of our consideration. We support the view that children's needs are best met within their own families. To support such reflection and decision making Merton has set up an 'Edge of Care and Rehabilitation' Panel to ensure that the any decision to accommodate a child or young person between the ages of 0-16 is rigorously reviewed and a robust care plan in place that has a focus on short term and long term care planning.

In addition to decisions relating to accommodation the panel also considers care planning where consideration is being given to rehabilitating a child to their parents care. National data shows that children who return home from care are the largest single group of children who cease to be looked after in any one year. Research shows that careful assessment of needs, evidence of improvements in parenting capacity, slow and well managed return home and the provision of services to support children and their families after the return were associated with a positive experience of reunification which lasted. The role of the panel is to ensure timely and effective decision-making and purposeful social work with children and their families to prepare and support the return, underpinning long term stability and good outcomes for individual children.

Merton's Fostering agency was rated Good by Ofsted in November 2012, inspectors noted that "Children and young people are able to make good progress in relation to their starting points across all aspects of their care and effective arrangements are in place to support this. Children and young people have positive views about their care and their relationships with foster carers".

All placements for looked after children are made by our dedicated Access to Resources (ART) service. Our placement stability performance of 12.7% (3 moves or more) is line with the national average of 11% (2013/14). Similarly our placement length performance (2 years or more) on a three year rolling average is 66% this is also in line with the national average of 68% (2011 – 2013). While our placement stability is broadly in line with national averages we continue to review the children who have undergone 2 and 3 moves or more during the year.

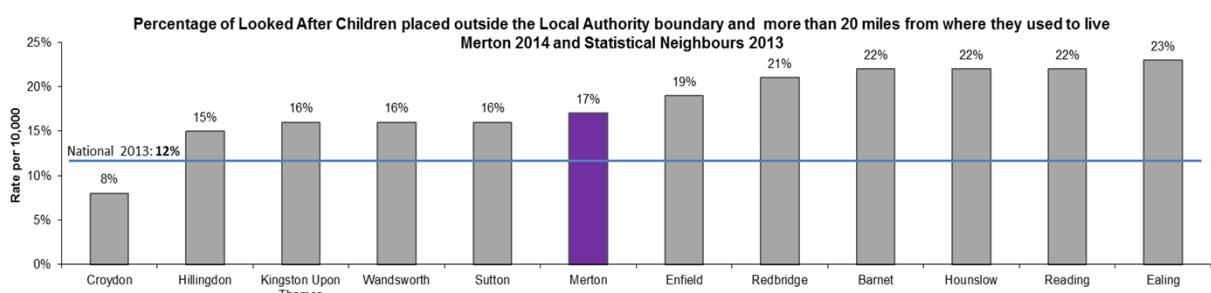
We are determined to find the most appropriate care for our looked after children, using family and friends; in-house foster carers; carers from the South West London consortium or a number of Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs).

We are placing more children with in house carers and therefore relying less on IFAs. Our annual LAC Sufficiency Strategy supports us to target our placement needs and procure appropriate care for our children. Since the establishment of a dedicated Access to Resources team in October 2011 we have approved 29 foster carers (as at September 2014), in recent years we have targeted the recruitment of in-house fosters towards our known deficits; including carers for sibling groups and teenagers.

When we are required to use independent settings we use those rated Good or Outstanding by Ofsted only, in exceptional circumstances we seek senior management authorisation to place children in settings which are rated adequate. Where we have children placed in IFA placements and the placement is identified as meeting their long term needs and in the best interest of the child, we committed to funding these placements long term.

Any young person who is reported as missing is referred to our commissioned service who undertakes a 'return to home' interview to support on-going risk management. For older young people pathway planning processes are used to agree a temporary absence from placement, through pre-arranged agreement. Merton has a child sexual exploitation strategy which provides clear and practical guidance for social workers and other practitioners dealing with cases where there is suspected child/young person sexual exploitation.

As at 31 March 2014 17% of our Looked After Children live more than 20 miles away from their home address. For some young people placements away from their home community are a key part of the care plan as a result of anti-social behaviour/risk taking behaviours. For some the needs of the young people are such that they require specialist placements which are not available in Merton or surrounding boroughs. For all children being placed outside of the borough the Director of Childrens Services is required to sign off agreement for the placement.



Merton's involvement in the Staying Put (2012/13) and Right2Bcared4 (2012/13) pilots has resulted in successful transition for a number of young people into greater independence at a pace that was appropriate to them.

Merton has small but well established supported lodgings/placements service for those aged 16 and above. These placements provide a helpful step to independence for those young people who choose this option. Supported lodgings carers are supported and guided by an accommodation officer working in the Fostering Team. Supported lodging placements enable our young people to develop their independent living skills within a family environment. Our young people and their carers are supported by the function from aged 16 to 21 depending on need.

Merton's commitment moving forward

1. We will develop a consistent approach to care planning for rehabilitation cases
2. We will continue to undertake work to understand our looked after children, this work will continue to inform our commissioning activity of suitable and sufficient places.
3. We will maintain conspicuous management oversight of 'two moves' cohort so that vulnerable placements can be identified and greater support interventions put in place.
4. We will reduce the use of independent fostering agencies.
5. We will reduce our of Borough placements which are greater than 20 miles
6. We will increase the number of in house foster carers for targeted groups
7. We will increase our focus on the rehabilitation of children and support to individual families.
8. We will carry out an 'At a distance review' as per the DfE publication to ensure our offer is the best it can be.

Impact measures

- A. Placement stability performance (3 moves or more) in line with national average or better (Merton 12.7%, national average 11% (2013/14)).
- B. Placement length (2 years or more) in line with national average or better (Merton three year rolling average 66%, national average 68% (2011 to 2013))
- C. Percentage of looked after children placed more than 20 miles away from home in line with national average or better (Merton 17%, national average 17% (2013/14))
- D. Number of in house foster carers recruited ART Team, (Since the establishment of a dedicated Access to Resources team in October 2011 we have assess and approved 29 foster carers (as at September 2014).)
- E. Percentage of children in foster care placed with IFA (independent fostering agencies)
- F. Percentage of children who more than one LAC episode

Priority 3: Education of Looked After Children

The National context

Local authorities are required to discharge their statutory duty under 22(3A) of the Children Act 1989 to promote the educational achievement of looked after children. That includes those children placed out-of-authority. The Children and Families Act 2014 amends section 22 of the Children Act 1989 to require every local authority in England to appoint an officer employed by the authority, or another authority, to make sure that its duty to promote the educational achievement of its looked after children is properly discharged (Virtual School Heads). Social workers, Virtual School Heads (VSH)s and IROs, school admission officers and special educational needs departments should work together to ensure that - except in an emergency - appropriate education provision for a child is arranged at the same time as a care placement.

All looked after children should have a Personal Education Plan (PEP) which should form a part of the child's care plan or detention placement plan.

Merton's track record

Our Virtual School provides a dedicated service for Merton's Looked After Children and Care Leavers wherever they live or are educated. The school's specialist Advisory Teachers in primary, secondary and post sixteen phases of education work to champion the need for all Looked After Children and Care Leavers. This is to ensure that they all have access to high quality schooling or education and training provision. The Virtual School also liaises with The Early Years Team to promote quality provision for younger children.

For children of statutory school age, The Virtual School closely monitors school attendance, progress and attainment. The Personal Education Plan is used to challenge and support schools and settings, social workers and carers to accelerate pupil progress and ensure good educational outcomes. The Virtual School distributes Pupil Premium funding according to the grant's terms and conditions and contributes to the funding of interventions to meet identified needs. Through effective advocacy, negotiation, improved SEN provision and inclusive practice, no Merton Looked After Child has been permanently excluded for the last five years

Carers, social workers, school staff, and young care leavers have direct access to The Virtual School for advice and guidance to ensure that education and training is integral to and supported as part of a child's care or pathway plan.

As part of our children's social care restructure the 16+ team became the 14+ team and a dedicated worker for Looked After Children was identified within the 'My Futures' team to enable earlier planning and support for young people during their GCSE years and transition to post 16 opportunities. Although The Statutory Guidance on the role of the Virtual School Head makes reference to Personal Education Plans being extended to include 16 and 17 year olds, we have focused more on ensuring robust pathway plans for all older Looked After Children which is reflected in increasing numbers of our young people entering further and higher education and relatively low number of young people who are Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET).

The Virtual School Headteacher provides an annual report to The Corporate Parenting Board and to the CYP Scrutiny Panel as part of the annual School Standards panel report. The report currently covers all aspects of education for Looked After Children and the engagement in education and training for Care Leavers.

Merton's commitment moving forward

1. We will continue to work with Early Years Specialists, Carers and setting to develop robust Early Years PEPs for 2, 3 and 4 year olds.
2. We will continue to support Looked After Children's pathway plans by ensuring earlier support for transition to education, training or employment at the end of Year 11 and beyond.
3. We will extend the Designated Teacher network to include all schools, colleges and commissioned Alternative Providers to enhance support for Merton Looked After Children and Care Leavers
4. We will build on our 'Celebrating Success' events for all age groups.
5. We will continue to support the local 'Aim Higher' project encouraging children to aspire to a university education.
6. We will continue to deliver apprenticeships specifically for our Looked After Children each year.
7. We will continue the five year track record to ensure that no Merton Looked After Child is excluded from school.

Impact measures

- A. Percentage of initial Personal Education Plans (PEP) completed within timescale.
- B. LAC primary attendance 94.8% (2012/13)
- C. 44% of LAC at Key Stage 2 achieved expected level of progress (National 31%)
- D. LAC secondary attendance 91.5% (2012/13)
- E. 21% LAC achieved 5 GCSEs including maths and English (2012/13), better than National 15.3%
- F. Number of Looked After Children excluded from school
- G. Number of Looked After Children in apprenticeships funded by Merton Council
- H. Number of Looked After Children further education
- I. Number of Care leavers in higher education
- J. Percentage of Care Leavers who are NEET
- K. Foster carers satisfaction on support provided in relation to education issues (Foster Carers survey)

Priority 4: Health of Looked After Children

The National context

Children often enter the care system with a poorer level of physical and mental health than their peers, and their longer-term outcomes remain worse. Nationally two thirds of looked after children have at least one physical health complaint, and nearly half have a mental health disorder.

Merton's track record

Health outcomes for Merton looked after children are better than the national average, these are supported by good support from NHS Trusts with good levels of routine health surveillance and access to specialist provision where necessary e.g. CAMHs.

Ninety five per cent of Merton LAC had an annual health assessment during 2013/14, compared to 87% nationally. Eighty three per cent of Merton LAC had their dental checks up to date during 2013/14, compared to 82% nationally. Ninety five per cent of Merton LAC had immunisations that were up to date during 2013/14, this is also better than the national average of 83%.

Eight per cent of Merton LAC (approximately 14 to 16 young people) were identified as having a substance misuse problem during 2013/14, compared to 3.5% nationally. Our higher percentage of substance misuse identification is representative of a proactive campaign to get social workers to make referrals for substance misuse assessment and intervention and partly due to our larger number of older YP in care as a proportion of the total cohort. Specialist substance misuse services are commissioned which provide a full range of support and therapeutic interventions for young people under the age of 25, using substances at a level affecting their ability to live a healthy, functioning life. Over the last year the services have engaged young people referred for targeted interventions via schools, the youth justice service and other voluntary and statutory agencies by providing structured programmes of support and education to reduce and cease drug/alcohol use.

Our annual strengths and difficulties questionnaire which measures the emotional wellbeing of our children in care puts us in line with the national average (Merton 12.3 average score, national average 13.9, 2013/14). A report is presented to our corporate parenting board annual the findings of which influence service improvement.

Merton's commitment moving forward

1. Health outcomes remain positive for our looked after children, we will ensure that we retain a good practice focus on dental appointments and LAC health appointments.
2. We will continue to use LAC review to ensure that the child's health needs are being met and escalate matters of concern to appropriate services.
3. We will continue to work with partners to ensure that we meet the needs of our LAC cohort when they are identified as having a substance misuse problem. We are confident that we have a good rate of successful identification, but need to improve performance in engaging young people with interventions.
4. For those children where mental health concerns are identified liaison takes place with CAMHS to ensure that needs are met. In some cases where children are not in settled placements the provision of support can prove challenging we will continue to find solutions to support these children.
5. We will continue to commission an independent advocacy service for Looked After Children

6. We will maintain effective challenge and accountability of services through the LAC Health Strategy group.

Impact measures

- A. Annual dental checks: 83% of Merton LAC have had their dental checks on time, this is in line with national 82% (2013/14)
- B. Annual health checks: 95% have annual health check, this is better than national 87%(2013/14)
- C. Annual immunisation: 95% have up to date immunisations, this is better than national 83% (2013/14)
- D. 8% of Merton LAC (approximately 14-16 young people) were identified as having a substance misuse problem during 2013/14, compared to 3.5% nationally
- E. Emotional and behavioural health SDQ score (strengths and difficulties questionnaire) Merton's average score 12.3, national benchmark 13.9
- F. Number of Looked After Children accessing the independent advocacy service.

Priority 5: Participation and positive activities

The National context

We all want our looked after children and care leavers to shape and influence the parenting they receive, and to see their views reflected in our strategies and commissioning plans. The council should facilitate Children in Care Council which encourages and supports children and young people to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

Social workers and carers are expected to support looked after children to access and benefit from hobbies, leisure, cultural and sporting activities. Social care staff should work with other professionals to maximise LAC access to local services.

Merton's track record

A central component of Merton's User Voice Strategy is a commitment to encouraging and supporting Looked After Children to give us feedback and to ensure that their views are key to informing decisions about care planning as well as informing wider service planning and delivery.

We listens to the views of children and young people, carers, parents and other service users through four key avenues. These are:

- An approach expected of all practitioners and managers which puts children's wishes and feelings at the centre of decision making and planning
- Merton's youth participation promise
- Targeted user feedback
- Complaints and compliments.

We have commissioned an independent advocacy service for many years to provide support to Looked After Children to ensure that their voice is heard and is central to decisions made about their care, since 2013 this has been delivered as an opt out service. We receive feedback from the advocacy service which has influenced practice and service strategy. For example young people have reported that any change in social worker causes them anxiety. We understand that having to build new relationships is difficult, so when we restructured our children's social care division in 2013 we minimised the transition points for children and young people moving through our services.

We have supported looked after young people to be involved in fostering preparation training and foster carer support group meetings, in order to share their experiences of being looked after. Feedback from potential/ current foster carers suggested that the training increased their understanding of the needs and experiences of looked after children; the aim is that this will have a positive impact on their practice:

- "it was good to understand the foster child's views"
- "It was good to think about the situation from a child's perspective"
- "it was nice to hear the view of other foster children"
- "I have learnt about how to welcome a child. Let the child know you are there for him"

All our in-house foster cares are required to regularly complete a "Let's Talk" update with all children in their care, these are fed back to social workers to take forward any concerns or actions identified.

Our Independent Reviewing Officer Service (IRO) is growing stronger to support and monitor how we the local authority ensures that every child's view and wish is heard in decisions about their care plans.

We facilitate young people's forums and activities which link with and impact on the management of children's services and the adult democratic process. These include the Children in Care council, Youth Parliament, Young Advisors, Young Inspectors and Your Shout (specifically for older young people with disabilities). Feedback from CYP across these strands of work have informed strategies including the Children and Young People's Plan, this LAC Strategy, the Care Leavers Strategy, children's services departmental service plans and discrete improvement plans.

The membership of and interest in our Children in Care Council has grown steadily throughout recent years. The appointment of a full time co-ordinator during 2012/13 enhanced this function which has been further supported by two Care Leaving apprentices during 2014/15. Representatives from the Children in Care Council played a significant role in the successful launch of the Children in Care Pledge in 2014. Young people from the Children in Care council are involved in the recruitment of senior Children Schools and Families staff including the Children Social Care Assistant Director in 2013 and the Education Assistant Director in 2014. Feedback from the Children in Care council is obtained by the Director and Lead Member for Children's Services who ensure a feedback loop to the Corporate Parenting Board, MSCB and the council's Administration. Actions arising from this feedback are taken forward by relevant parties and fed back to the young people. An example of this is a recent request for gym membership for looked after children following this request as at September 2014, 20 LAC have received free membership to our local gyms.

When things go wrong, Merton reviews feedback from children and young people as a central part of our drive for continuous improvement of services. Complaints are resolved quickly through resolution meetings at stage one, and are seen as an opportunity to improve services. Looked after young people also have access to independent advocates.

Merton's commitment moving forward

1. We will continue to ensure an independent advocacy service is available for children looked after by the local authority
2. We will continue to support our IRO service to deliver robust challenge to practice
3. We will continue to encourage participation in the Children in Care council, and our young people to take on leadership roles in areas of interest.
4. We will continue to resolve complaints quickly and if possible through resolution meetings before the need for formal complaints arise.
5. We will continue to identify interests and hobbies through our care planning process
6. We will continue to create a range of opportunities for appropriate formal and informal 'participation' and engagement for our looked after children, including for example coffee meetings, fun activities and surveys.

Impact measures

- A. Percentage of LAC satisfied with the service received (IRO survey)
- B. Percentage of LAC participating in there reviews
- C. Maintain a range of at least 8 to 15 children and young people regularly participating in the Children in Care Council events
- D. Number of complaints made by children in care
- E. Percentage of children supported by the independent advocacy service
- F. Numbers of young people involved in task and finish service develop groups.

Priority 6: Looked after Children of particular circumstance

The National context

Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012

The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and Home Office (HO) recognise that young adults who have been in care can be particularly vulnerable as they transition into adulthood, particularly if they are in the criminal justice system. They are also a particularly vulnerable group that are at risk of being drawn into crime. Equally we know that care leavers can be particularly vulnerable to becoming a victim of crime, including in some cases falling victim to grooming and exploitation online or offline.

Despite the recent reduction in the number of first time entrants to the criminal justice system, and a welcome drop in the number of children imprisoned in England and Wales, looked after children are vastly over-represented in the youth justice system: children in care and care leavers account for less than one per cent of the population (The Care Leavers Association, 2013) yet almost a third of children in prison have been looked after by a local authority at some point (HMIP, 2012).

- Children in care and care leavers account for less than 1% of the population.
- Over 25% of the adult prison population has previously been in care.
- 49% of young men under the age of 21 in the Criminal Justice System have spent time in care.
- 27% of young men in custody have spent time in care.
- 40% of girls in the 15-18 age group in custody have spent some time in local care¹.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SENDIS)

Short breaks

Short breaks are part of a continuum of services which support children in need and their families. They include the provision of day, evening, overnight and weekend activities for the child and can take place in the child's own home, the home of an approved carer, or in a residential setting. The decision to provide a short break under Section 17 or under Section 20 of the Childrens Act 1989 should be informed by the assessment of the child's needs and should take account of parenting capacity and wider family and environmental factors, the wishes and feelings of the child and his/her parents and the nature of the service to be provided.

Residential educational placements

The issue of residential school placements is a more complex matter and will depend on the individual circumstances of each case. A reference point for such decisions is case law dated 2011: R (O) v East Riding of Yorkshire Council (2011) EWCA CIV 196.

In the majority of cases the decision to place a child in a residential school setting will be informed by a statutory assessment under the terms of the Children and Families Act 2014. The statutory assessment involves following a specific set of legal procedures, and draws together evidence from educational, medical, social care and other staff.

In relation to 38 week residential school placements there will also need to be consideration given to individual case circumstances, and whilst a the majority of children with not become

¹ Source: Contact: [Care Leavers, LAC and the Criminal Justice System](#)

looked after, there will be circumstances where some will. This is particularly the case when they have respite in addition and the Section 20 criteria are met.

Merton's track record

Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders

To support and embed the Legal Aid and Sentencing/Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO) in Merton, a LASPO Operational Group was established in January 2014 to monitor the arrangements and process in place when young people are placed on remand.

During 2014 Merton's LASPO Operational group has developed a LASPO policy and process. Our Youth Offender Management Panel regularly reviews young people up to the age of 19 this allows local partners to come together to ensure that risk management of young offenders is managed in a co-ordinated way.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

Short breaks

Disabled children assessed as needing short breaks to support them remaining within their families are offered a variety of services, including direct payments, day care provision and overnight stays. Merton's disabled children have a choice of day care and weekend provision and access to mainstream holiday schemes, depending on their individual needs and requirements. Some of these services are commissioned from external providers and offer a range of services including weekday, after school, holiday and weekend activities.

Merton continues to run a children's respite home (Brightwell) that offers both day care and overnight short breaks for disabled children, which was graded Good by Ofsted in 2015. Inspectors noted that we are "very focussed on outcomes, partnerships and goals" and we have a clear idea of what to prioritise to maintain a good care environment. There remains a small group of young people who have been unable to access the overnight provision at Brightwell due to their specific needs. The two main groups in this area are children with specific medical needs, requiring more specialist medical intervention and children with extreme challenging behaviour which could put others at risk of injury. These children have their needs met through external services.

Any decision to place a child under a Section 20 short breaks arrangement is authorised by a Service Manager and presented to the Edge of Care and Rehab Panel.

Residential educational placements

Children and young people who have complex special needs and educational requirements are supported into appropriate residential educational placements. These residential placements offer children and young people the assistance to pursue their academic achievements, develop independence and living skills.

Merton only places in educational residential placements which are graded good or Outstanding, in exceptional circumstances if a school is rated as adequate and meets a very specific need senior management authorisation is sought.

The quality of placement for these most complex children have been well matched, no child or young person has needed to be transferred to an alternative provision.

Merton's commitment moving forward

Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders

1. We will ensure robust multi-agency exit plans are in place for all LAC at point of discharge from custody
2. We will ensure that the voice of the young person in custody is heard
3. We will ensure the robust tracking of multi-agency involvement on all LASPO cases to promote practice standards

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

1. We will ensure that Merton continues to facilitate diverse ranges of communication methods to enable children with disabilities to influence their plans and placements.
2. We will continue to improve multi agency coordination to meet the complex needs of these children and young people
3. We will continue to ensure that our children and young have access to the appropriate provision based and a robust needs assessment
4. We will continue to seek the consult of children and parents when developing services

Short breaks

1. We will continue to ensure that good quality suitable short break provision made available
2. We will ensure that for those children who are fostered and require respite that this need is met

Residential educational placements

3. We will continue to ensure that only good or outstanding residential educational placements are procured, except in exceptional circumstances when senior management authorisation will be sought.
4. We will ensure that where children are placed at a distance we will maintain a full service offer.

Impact measures

- A. Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders
 - a. Percentage and number of looked after children in custody.
- B. Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
 - a. Percentage and number of residential educational placement moves (expected polarity low)

Priority 7: Permanency

The National context

The best possible care involves giving children security, stability and love through their childhood and beyond. There are a range of permanent care options which can do this. Many looked after children are looked after by local authorities for short periods and then return home to live with their families. Local authorities are under a legal duty to support families to stay together when that is a realistic prospect. Nationally three quarters of looked after children are in foster placements. For some this is a temporary arrangement, but for many children, particularly older children with a link to their birth parents, long-term foster care, often with family or friends, is the best permanent care option.

Special guardianship was introduced in 2005 as a way of giving foster carers, a relative or family friend parental responsibility for a child without severing the child's ties with his or her birth family. Residence orders were introduced in 1989 and are usually used by relatives. Residence orders are made for some children who are in children's homes – when this environment can provide the best for children with particularly complex and specialist needs. Each of these options can offer the best possible care to an individual child.

In some cases adoption is the best option – particularly for younger children, but also for some older children. Adoption gives vulnerable children, including many with complex needs and a history of ill-treatment, the greatest possible stability, in a permanent home with a permanent family. The Government continues to monitor the timeliness of adoption through annual returns and the adoption scorecard process. The adoption scorecard focuses on local authorities and the adoption process for children; this has developed to include data on timeliness for prospective adopters from 2014.

Merton's track record

We have a longstanding approach to preventing children becoming looked after. If we understand that it is in the best interest of the child to become looked after we seek to ensure that our care plans appropriately safeguard our children and support decisions around permanency. As such we pursue permanency in the form of returning home, placements with friends and family as connected persons, long term fostering, residential care, special guardianship orders and adoption.

We have worked with the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) to review and support our permanency improvement plans. Recommendations have been followed through and we have completed significant work around Family and Friends care across the service and embedded a greater understanding about Connected Persons and the processes to be followed.

Permanence planning for children aged 0-5 years has seen a great deal of focus over the past 18 months and as a result we have seen an increase in the number of Special Guardianship and Adoption Orders made (Ten looked after children were adopted and four made subject of a Special Guardianship Order during 2013/14 year). We ensure that we track each child's progress to permanency so that we can understand their journey and learn from any delay that may have been experienced.

Merton's Adoption agency was inspected in January 2013, Ofsted found that we provided an effective service to all affected by adoption and gave an overall judgement of Good. Inspectors noted that the DfE adoption scorecard published in 2012 highlighted historical poor timeliness issues but found that the authority had worked hard to improve. They recognised that subsequent year on year performance showed substantial improvements across all areas

albeit that the impact of the rolling three year data would continue to impact on published performance tables for some time. We recognise the need to maintain our improvement trajectory and continue to act more quickly in our family finding and deliver our action plans to improve permanency and speed up care proceedings. Ofsted noted that Adoption is viewed as a positive option for all children needing permanency, whatever their needs or characteristics and that “the lifelong implications of adoption are fully understood and people’s needs are catered for, whatever their age”. Since our inspection we have also strengthened our sub regional working, launching a South West London Adoption Consortium Adoption website in November 2014. This aims to improve information and guidance published for those interested in adopting, improve our recruitment processes delivering a south west London approach to application interest and assessment.

Merton’s commitment moving forward

1. We will remain committed to considering all options of permanency for all our children requiring a placement outside of their own family; this includes for those with the most complex needs, regardless of the impact on our performance scorecard
2. We will continue to work closely with the South West London Adoption Consortium (SWLAC) to ensure that we are pooling resources and subsequently securing best matches.
3. We will maintain an effective publicity campaign to ensure that we are targeting carers who are prepared and able to meet the complex needs of the children for whom adoption is the plan.
4. We will continue to improve the timeliness of good quality matches for children for whom permanency is the plan.
5. We will improve permanency planning for children aged 6+.

Impact measures

- A. Placement length (2 years or more) in line with national average or better (Merton three year rolling average 66%, national average 68% (2011 – 2013))
- B. Number of adoptions made (2013/14, 10 CYP)
- C. Average time (days) between entering care and moving in with adoptive family, for children who have been adopted’ indicator shows improvement (Adoption Scorecard indicator A1). Merton’s current A1 performance is 689 days (2011-2014), the national average is 647 days (2010-2013)
- D. Number of adult adopters recruited (2013/14, 7 adopters (5 couples and 2 singles))
- E. Numbers of Special Guardianship Orders granted (2013/14, 4 CYP)
- F. Number (and percentage) of 6 to 14 year old children with Full Care Orders (Section 31) who have been permanently matched.

Priority 8: Care Leavers

The National context

The duty to promote the educational achievement of a looked-after child extends to looked-after young people aged 16 or 17 preparing to leave care. These are referred to in the Children Act 1989 as 'eligible children'.

Merton's track record

In 2014 Merton launched a Care Leavers strategy based on the DfE best practice paper. Priority 8 should therefore be read in conjunction with the Care Leavers strategy in which all of our priorities and commitments to our Care leavers are presented.

Merton has maintained and strengthened services for care leavers to support their successful transition to adulthood. The outcomes achieved by our care leavers often depend on the age they become looked after, however our ambitions for all looked after children and care leavers remain high. In addition to a targeted Care Leavers strategy we also formalised our commitment to all Care Leaver's by signing up to a co-developed Charter in February 2013.

Our organisational structure (14+ Team) supports the delivery of our ambitions and ensures that we develop long lasting proactive relationships with our young people. A number of our Care leavers choose to continue to support the Children in Care Council and more informally choose to keep in touch with us when they have leave care for advice, guidance and kinship.

Merton's commitment moving forward

1. Performance in the Care Leaver area is challenging and we have therefore worked with partners to develop a Care Leaver Strategy which targets issues relating to housing, employment and health. Please refer to the Care Leavers strategy for more information about our service and support commitments.

Impact measures

- A. A range of impact measures relating to Care Leavers education; attainment and housing amongst other things are addressed in our Care Leavers Strategy.

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