

Committee: Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Date: 22nd March 2016

Agenda item:

Wards: All

Subject: Corporate Parenting, Looked After Children (LAC) and Care Leavers

Lead officer: Yvette Stanley, Director of Children, Schools and Families

Lead member: Cllr Judy Saunders, Interim Cabinet Member for Children's Services

Contact officer: Paul Angeli, Assistant Director CSC & YI/Sarah Daly, Head of Permanency, LAC & Care Leavers

Recommendations:

Members of the Panel consider the contents of the report as part of their scrutiny of Merton's approach to corporate parenting and of support of and outcomes for Merton's looked after children and care leavers.

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1. The report provides members with an overview of our work to support and improve outcomes for Merton's looked after children and care leavers and by way of appendices provides the Panel with information which is seen and scrutinised by the statutory Corporate Parenting Panel (CPP). The CPP is chaired by the Chief Executive and includes the partners who have a statutory duty to work together to ensure the championing of and better meeting the needs and aspirations of our LAC and care leavers.
- 1.2. It should be noted that the information in appendices has been anonymised and redacted to ensure that children and young people cannot be identified and to enable the information to be published. The CPP is provided with more detailed information but this would not be suitable for public discussion.

2 DETAILS

- 2.1 The Corporate Parenting Panel is chaired by the Chief Executive and is attended by the administration and opposition lead members for children's services as well as officers from across the council and its partners in providing children's services.
- 2.2 The terms of reference include:
 - Understanding and championing the needs and ambitions of looked after children and care leavers across the Merton Partnership.
 - Ensuring joined up pathways in education, health, employability, leisure and recreation, for Merton LAC, LAC children overseen by the Virtual School and Merton care leavers.

- Receiving direct feedback from Merton Children in Care Council and the wider looked after children and care leaver population, to improve council and partner service development and delivery.
- Providing mutual challenge within and across the partnership to prioritise continuous improvement for services and outcomes.
- Giving conspicuous care and attention to particularly vulnerable looked after children such as young offenders, substance misusers and pregnant teenagers, to ensure effective risk assessment and appropriate service support.

2.3 The CPP meets bi-monthly and routinely: reviews the LAC and care leavers and their outcomes; receives feedback from LAC and care leavers participation; and throughout its annual work programme receives reports with a specific focus: health; education; housing; CAMHs etc. Where performance or other intelligence indicates it the CPP can and does receive more detailed reports on specific issues. Its role in summary is to both advocate for LAC and care leavers and to scrutinise and challenge all partners regarding LAC and care leaver outcomes. Key information from a selection of reports received at the last meeting of the CPP is attached (see appendix list).

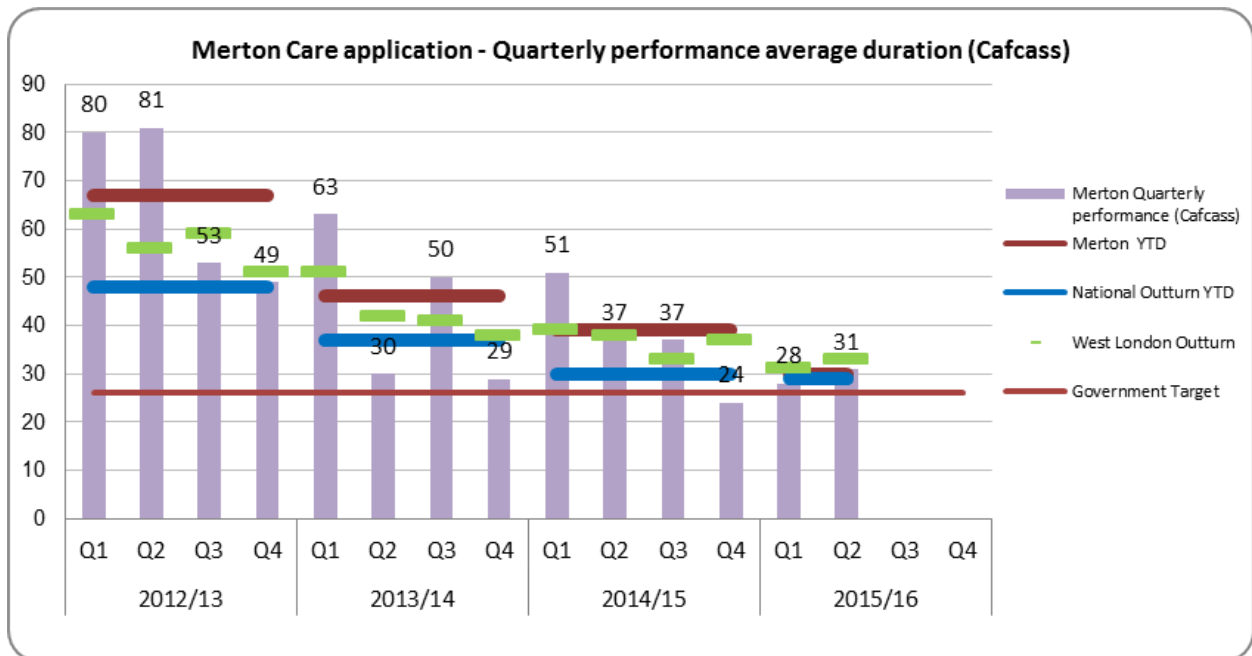
3 THE EXPERIENCE AND PROGRESS OF OUR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN AND CARE LEAVERS

3.1 In Merton we are ambitious for all our children and young people, particularly so for all children who become looked after by the authority. This was reflected in Ofsted's inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services in January 2012 which rated Merton's 'ambition and prioritisation' as Good. Our Children and Young People's Plan sets out our ambitions for our looked after children and this is enhanced by our LAC Strategy and Care Leavers Strategy which has been endorsed and monitored by the Children's Trust, the Merton Safeguarding Children's Board and the Corporate Parenting Panel.

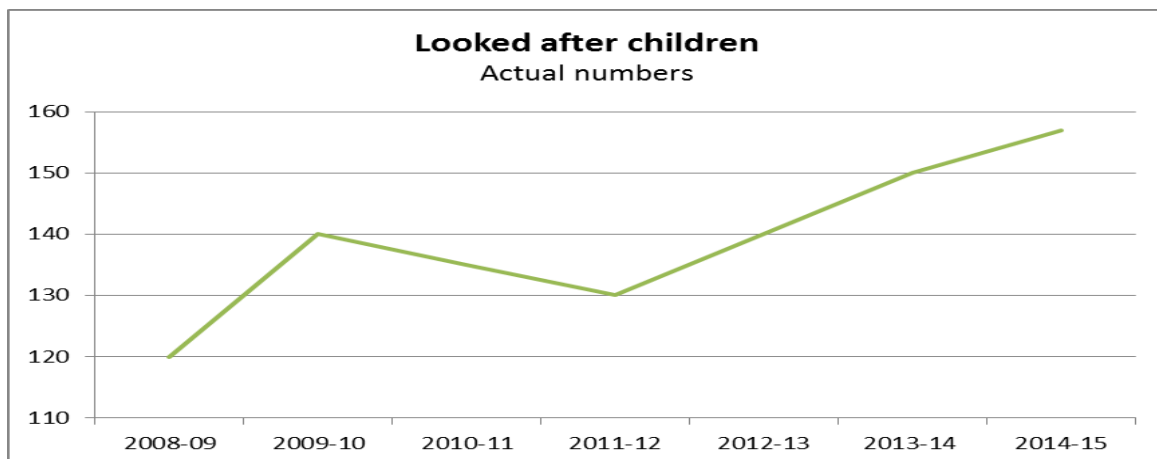
3.2 Since 2012, however, both national and local expectations have risen with regard to performance in relation to a number of key areas involving LAC and care leavers including a greater focus on adoption and a raft of changes arising out of the Children and Families Act including the rights of care leavers to "stay put" with their foster carers and to extend the duration of leaving care services.

3.3 **Care proceedings** – 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 Act. We established a team aimed to reduce delay and to deliver a timescale for care proceedings cases to conclude in 26 weeks. Further structural changes were made in 2015 to ensure a stronger focus on long term care. We have reviewed key processes and procedures to ensure compliance with the new Public Law Outline guidance. These changes ensure a more joined up approach with clearer accountability and effective

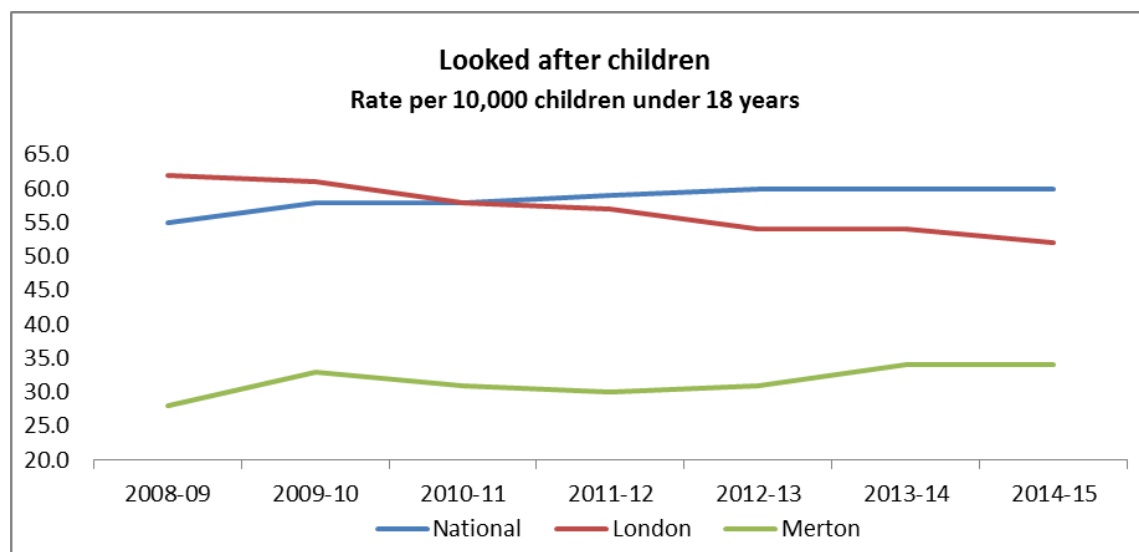
working across services and teams. Management oversight continues to be maintained through monthly case tracking panels chaired by service managers and attended regularly by the Director or Assistant Director. As a result we have seen considerable improvements in the duration of care applications. It should be noted however that small cohorts of children can significantly impact quarterly performance.



3.4 The LAC population – Our LAC population has increased from 96 (2006/7) to 157 (2014/15) and currently stands at 160 (January 2016). The reasons include increased national awareness of safeguarding, increasing birth rate, classification of young people on remand as LAC and more general demographic changes in Merton. Merton has an unusual profile of looked after children at the older age range this includes an increase in the numbers of Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers (32 during 2014/15). UASC account for a significant proportion of our increase in LAC and care leavers.



3.5 Merton's rate per 10,000 in March 2015 was 34, this remains below statistical neighbours.



3.6 **Care planning** – While children are in care, we implement robust parenting assessments and family group conferences which lead to a sustainable long term plan for the child. For children leaving care, their Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) will chair a planning meeting to transfer the LAC Care plan to a Child in Need plan. This is supported by a multi-agency core group and ensures that the appropriate support is put in place for the family and child at the point of transition. Where this plan involves returning home, parenting support programmes are offered which are intended to address identified risks and support a safe return home, building family capacity and confidence - an example is the 'Caring Dads' programme.

3.7 Merton endeavours to continue to work with the family and child returning home to reduce the chances of a subsequent episode of care. We started an 'Entry to Care and Rehabilitation Home Resource Panel' in April 2014, which has increased our focus on the rehabilitation of children and oversees planning for work with individual families to support rehabilitation.

3.8 Children and young people are encouraged to give their views during all their reviews. At the end of March 2015, 87% had participated in all reviews during the financial year. On evaluating the cases in which the young people had not participated in reviews, we noted that data recording was an issue and that participation had actually taken place. New guidance has been issued to the IRO team to support and facilitate participation and accurate recording of this activity.

3.9 Children are supported by their carers and social workers to complete consultation papers as an aid and in preparation for discussion at reviews and to confirm their views. In addition to completing consultation papers,

Independent Reviewing Officers ensure they meet with children away from reviews to create a relationship with them. If children raise concerns, the IRO contacts relevant team managers for quick resolutions. Should this not resolve the issue, we operate a dispute resolution process and all IRO's meet with the Assistant Director quarterly and bi-annually with the Director to review themes and issues arising.

- 3.10 The child's social worker and the family finding social worker, as well as the adopter's social worker (where relevant), ensure that the child understands what is happening to them and support them to act on their feelings and wishes. All care plans for LAC are regularly reviewed and Personal Educational Plans are ambitious for our LAC in fulfilling their potential.
- 3.11 **Listening to our LAC and Care Leavers** – We are committed to listening and responding to our young people's voices and there has been a longstanding commitment in Merton to investing in direct work skills training which equips social workers with high level engagement and communication skills. In line with this commitment and with the recommendations of the Munro review, learning and development opportunities for both newly qualified and more experienced staff routinely have included:
- Keeping the child in focus - communicating with vulnerable children and young people.
 - Direct work with children
 - Life Story Work and My Story (workshops delivered by the adoption team in partnership with CAMHS) Children's rights
 - Signs of Safety
 - Motivational interviewing
- 3.12 Social workers are aware of the statutory requirements for the frequency of visits to children, and include seeing children alone. 95% of LAC reviews were completed within timescale as at 31 March 2015. Records of visits are saved to the child's case record in a timely way and managers review and authorise the visits. Social workers see children regularly and the monitoring of these visits and the capture of children's views is coordinated through a monthly performance report to all managers.
- 3.13 When things go wrong, Merton reviews feedback from children and young people as a central part of our drive for continuous improvement of services. All looked after young people have access to advocates although some may choose not to take up this service commissioned from Jigsaw4U.
- 3.14 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 children and young people across these strands of work have informed strategies including the Children and Young People's Plan, LAC Strategy, CSF service plans and discrete improvement plans as well as broader council services such as the borough's regeneration plans. The membership of and interest in the Children in Care Council has grown steadily throughout recent years. The appointment of a full

time co-ordinator during 2012/13 has enhanced this function. In 2014/15, we first appointed a care leaver as a participation officer and we have continued this tradition. Representatives from the Children in Care Council played a significant role in the successful launch of the Looked After Children and Care Leaver's Pledge in February 2014 and will be involved in its review in April 2016. Young people from the Children in Care Council are involved in the recruitment to the Children's Social Care Division and senior posts across CSF.

- 3.15 Feedback from the Children in Care Council is obtained by the Director, Lead Member for Children's Services and Head of LAC and Permanency 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.
- 3.16 **LAC health outcomes** – Health outcomes for Merton looked after children are better than the national average. These are backed by good support from NHS Trusts with good levels of routine health surveillance and access to specialist provision, e.g. CAMHS, where necessary. Ninety four per cent of Merton LAC had an annual health assessment during 2014/15 compared to 89% nationally (2014/15). Ninety five per cent of Merton LAC had a dental check during 2014/15, compared to 85% nationally (2014/15). 86% of Merton LAC had immunisations that were up to date (2014/15), compared to 86% nationally in 2014/15.
- 3.17 6% of Merton LAC (5 young people) were identified as having a substance misuse problem during 2014/15 compared to 4% nationally in 2014/15. This followed on from a proactive campaign to get social workers to make referrals for substance misuse assessment and intervention and the relatively high figure might be in part explained by our larger number of older young people 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.
- 3.18 The Merton CAMHS Social Care Team (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service) is now in place as part of the borough's Children's Social Care service. This adds a quality, integrated mental health component to the engagement, assessment, planning and support of our looked after children.
- 3.19 The LAC CAMHS works as part of a multi-agency response to improve the quality of life for children and young people that have a wide range of presenting social, psychological and mental health needs. It provides effective evidence-based interventions as part of the clinical and social response to meeting the emotional and mental health needs of these vulnerable children and young people.

- 3.20 **LAC educational outcomes** – Education outcomes for our looked after children are improving. No Merton looked after child has been permanently excluded from school in the last six years. Fixed term exclusions significantly reduced.
- 3.21 Our innovative Virtual School for LAC is proving effective in championing the education of LAC (particularly important in out of borough placements) and supporting improved educational attainment and progress and attendance. 80% KS2 LAC achieved Level 4 in reading, writing and maths compared to 48% nationally (2013/14). 20% achieved 5 GCSEs incl. English & Maths (above national 12%) (2013/14). 45% achieved five GCSE's. LAC primary attendance 94% (2013/14) in line with 2012/13 national. LAC secondary attendance 93% (2013/14), 2% better than 2012/13 national.
- 3.22 The Virtual School provides dedicated teacher capacity for LAC at primary, secondary and 16+ phases. Personal Education Plans are well established and the quality of education planning has improved with the involvement of specialist teaching staff. Foster carers have direct access to Virtual School staff. Through effective negotiation and advocacy, improved SEN provision has been secured for Merton's LAC placed out of borough.
- 3.23 As part of our children and social care restructure the 16+ team became the 14+ team to enable earlier planning and support for young people during their GCSE years. Increasing numbers of LAC are entering higher education and we are working hard to improve our NEET numbers. 44% of our care leavers are in education, employment or training (2014/15) - this is below the national average of 48%, our new Care Leavers Strategy aims to improve this performance, despite having some very complex young people
- 3.24 Attendance of Merton's LAC is monitored routinely by a commissioned service which provides timely feedback to carers and foster carers. Merton's Virtual School for LAC maintains an overview of LAC school attendance providing support and challenge to schools, social workers and carers to maximise attendance and attainment. The Head teacher of the Virtual School provides an annual report to the Corporate Parenting Board and information on LAC educational outcomes was reported to the CYP Panel as part of the Standards Report. A copy of the Virtual Heads report is included as an appendix.
- 3.25 **Wider educational, social and recreational opportunities for LAC** – Merton's overall approach to working with children looked after incorporates a holistic understanding of the importance of life chances. We not only support good health and educational outcomes but also see other elements of life as core to promoting good outcomes. The care planning process identifies interests and hobbies of our children in care and funding is available to encourage our young people to participate in these interests. This includes the creative use of corporate parenting budgets to encourage talents and special aptitudes of LAC and care leavers. There is a delegated authority protocol in place that clarifies the decision making responsibility of foster carers in respect of access to recreational and leisure activities. Following the withdrawal of the Personal Education Allowance (PEA), the Virtual School

was allocated funding to support enrichment activities for Looked After Children. Additional funding from the Designated Schools' Grant was awarded for the financial year 2015/16. This funding has been included in the base budget allocations going forward.

- 3.26 The Virtual School provides resources to foster carers which include books, puzzles, games, CDs and DVDs. We have also secured e-safety training and on-going support for six Olympic Legacy Computers for foster carers in need of a PC. We have secured additional DSG funding to ensure that all eligible looked after children have their own computer provided and maintained by the Virtual School.
- 3.27 In recent times the authority has supported music lessons, bought sporting equipment and funded young people to attend events of interest. In one instance, following music lessons funded by our Virtual School, one of our LAC has been awarded the London Mayor's Music Scholarship. Other examples of enrichment activities include: the Letterbox Project involving children receiving a parcel of books, maths activities and other materials monthly. We also organise a number of cultural activities which include theatre trips for LAC, their carers and our care leavers.
- 3.28 We support a range of events and activities throughout the year including for example BBQs, celebrating success events which the Lead Member for Children's Services always attends. We also hold a monthly social event at a local coffee shop where young people and practitioners get together to play games and watch films.
- 3.29 Our young people are encouraged to participate in the Children in Care Council which gives them the opportunity to take on leadership roles in areas of interest such as leisure and housing. We have continued to support the Aim Higher Project (previously government funded) which encourages young people to aspire to a university education - four Merton Looked After Children have attended university taster days this year. We have continued to secure funding to establish apprenticeships within the Local Authority for care leavers.
- 3.30 **Safe, stable and appropriate placements** – All placements for looked after children are made by our dedicated Access to Resources (ART) service. A separate report covers placements sufficiency including stability and other factors.
- 3.31 **Family-finding and permanent placements** – Our family finding strategies are informed by an assessment of the child's needs and matched by suitability. This includes the work at Bond Road in completing Family Group Conferences and parenting assessments at an early stage to identify potential SGO placements. Decisive action to find appropriate families aims to avoid drift and delay to permanency. In Merton, the process of family finding starts from the day the child enters care. In addition to the usual supervisory oversight, permanency plans are tracked by senior managers on a monthly basis to ensure that they are in the best interest of the child, that practice processes are followed in line with expected timescales and that delays for individual children are minimised. Respite care is used when this

is in the best interests of children and young people. Permanency planning meetings are chaired by senior managers and as part of this process, early virtual matches are made with prospective adopters who are progressing through the process. This enables us to achieve early matches where possible at the adoption approval panel. The identification of adoptive placements takes place prior to the conclusion of care proceedings.

- 3.32 **Matching for permanence** – Permanency is considered for all children at the earliest point possible, triggered by discussions in tracking and planning meetings. All children for whom adoption is the plan are proactively reviewed by the Adoption team who are responsible for the assessment of prospective adopters. This facilitates matching at an early stage in the process. Anonymised discussions are held with prospective adopters regarding children for whom adoption is the plan. Planning meetings are held prior to a placement progressing and introductions are carefully monitored to ensure successful transition of care for the child. Life story work is used to support such transitions for any child of an age and understanding to ensure that they are best prepared for their move to a permanent placement.
- 3.33 The child's wishes and feelings are elicited and described in the Child Permanence Report prepared for the presentation to the Adoption, Fostering and Permanency Panel. Family Finding Adoption team social workers draw up profiles for children eliciting their views (where possible given their age) both for written profiles and in videos. Tools are available to support social workers, children and families to develop life story work. An interactive life story resource is available for workers to use. This is a very useful tool to help a child express their emotions and perceptions. We feel it is never too late to do a life story book or too early to start one. We have examples of using innovative tools to capture life story work which includes a visual presentation for children with special needs. Post adoption feedback received has identified the transition process to be well managed and supportive to those involved.
- 3.34 **The role of the Independent Reviewing Officers** – Permanency plans are monitored by Independent Reviewing Officers who challenge colleagues on care planning issues where necessary. IROs engage directly where appropriate with children and their guardians to support the delivery of the plans. Children are encouraged to give their views during their reviews; Independent Reviewing Officers also ensure they meet with children away from reviews to create a relationship with them. If the child raises any concerns, the IRO contacts the various team managers for a resolution. Should this not resolve the issue, we operate a dispute resolution process and all IROs meet with the Assistant Director quarterly to review themes and issues arising. IROs engage with children's guardians and care planning.
- 3.35 Routine IRO reports are presented to the Continuous Improvement Board enabling senior managers to have sight of themes and issues which may require their intervention.
- 3.36 **Adoption** – Merton's adoption agency was inspected in January 2013. Ofsted found that we provided a 'Good' service to all children for whom adoption was the plan and that their outcomes were good. The report

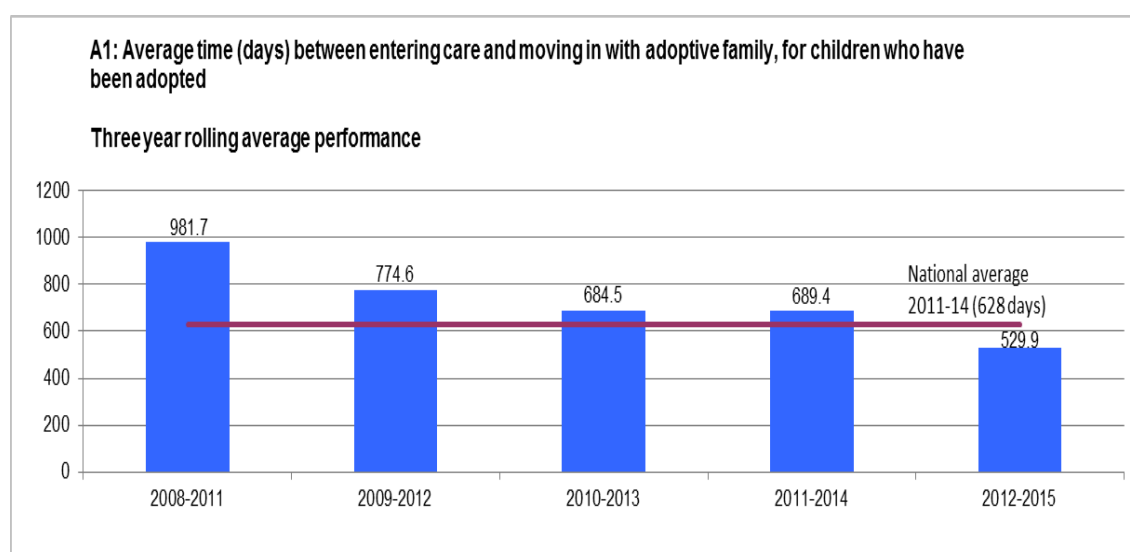
highlighted many areas of good practice with inspectors recognising that the lifelong implications of adoption are fully understood and people's needs catered for, whatever their age. Ofsted noted that adoption is viewed as a positive option for all children needing permanency, whatever their needs or characteristics. The report clearly identified that the DfE adoption scorecard published in 2012 highlighted poor historical timeliness issues which the department had worked hard to improve and that current performance showed substantial improvements across all areas. The inspection team made five recommendations for areas for improvement all of which were implemented and delivery monitored.

3.37 We have especially focused on improving our adoption performance. We are not only delivering more adoptions per year but are also consistently delivering adoptions faster.

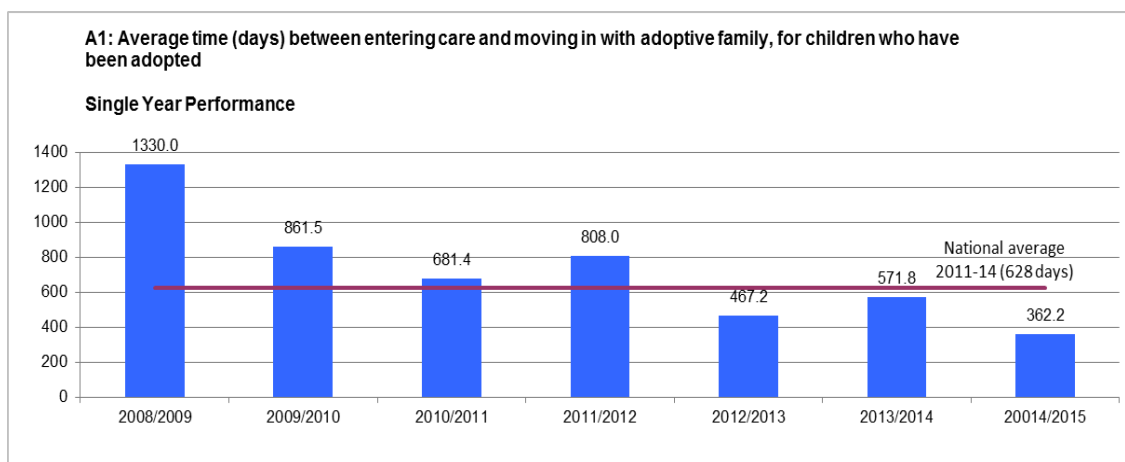
Numbers of adoptions made:

Year	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Number of children adopted	5	2	5	9	5	10	8

3.38 We believe that wherever we have decided that adoption is the plan for a child, we should aim to place the child as early as possible with the carers who are likely to become their adoptive parents. We use concurrency placements and fostering to adopt approaches. We recognise however that as only relatively small numbers of looked after children are adopted, any delay in even one case results in a disproportionate impact to our overall performance and distorts our reported figures. Despite the challenges of small cohorts and complex cases year on year, we are able to demonstrate a trend of improvement in the average time it takes for a child who goes on to be adopted from entering care to moving in with his or her adoptive family.

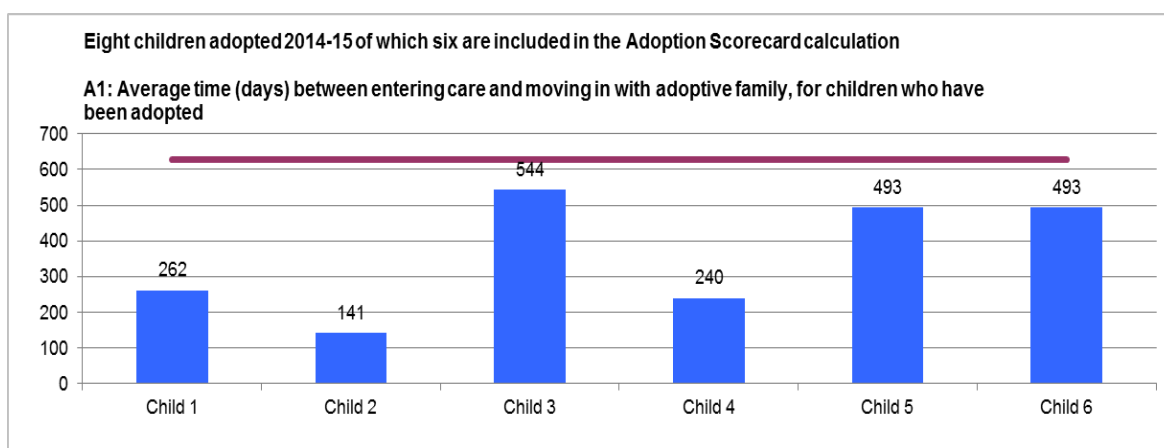


3.39 The individual years show a clear improving trend.

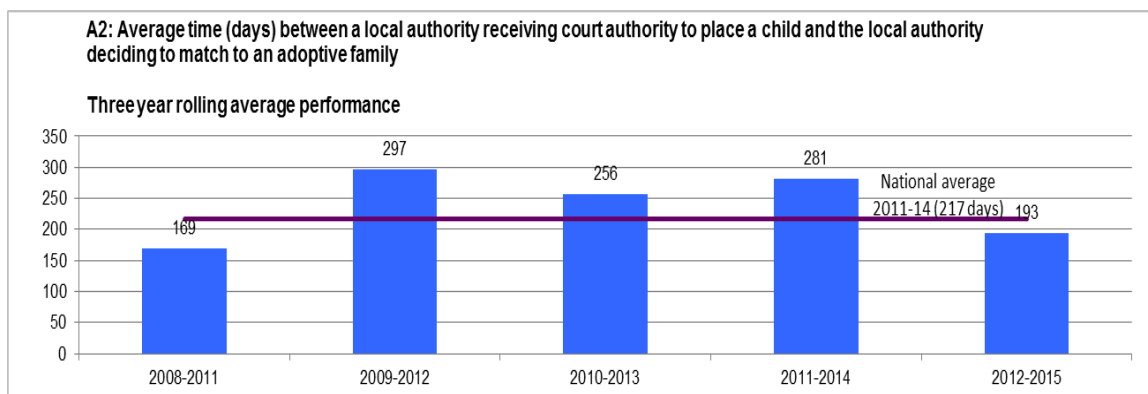


3.40 In 2014/15, Merton had 8 children who were adopted of which six are included in the Adoption Scorecard calculation. Of these 8 children, none took longer than the national average time of 628 days to be matched for adoption once the court had formally decided that adoption was the best option. These children had additional needs which needed to be catered for. Factors which have caused delays in Merton adoption processes in the past include:

- Birth parent appeal at key stages in the process
- Complexity of the child’s needs (e.g. disability)
- Sibling groups



3.41 Year on year, we are also able to demonstrate some continued improvement in the average time from receiving court authority to place a child and matching with adoptive family (A2).



3.42 Merton's three year rolling average for this indicator is 193 (2012/15) - this is better than the average of 217 days (2011/14).

3.43 **Care leavers** – Merton has maintained and strengthened services for care leavers to support their successful transition to adulthood. The outcomes achieved by our care leavers often depends on the age they become looked after, however our ambitions for all looked after children and care leavers remain high. In 2014/15 we launched a specific Care Leavers Strategy to highlight our focus and priorities to support these young people which supports our Looked After Children strategy. During 2014/15, we established a multi-agency task and finish group to drive through our improvement commitments to our Care Leavers. On a daily basis, 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 left care for advice, guidance and kinship.

3.44 Our LAC and Permanency service aims to promote and improve care planning for young looked after children for whom remaining in care is the long term plan. The team focuses on supporting these young people to adulthood and independence. This includes empowering them to understand risks and how their life choices will affect their safety and well-being. Any risks associated with offending, drug or alcohol misuse, going missing or with sexual exploitation are identified and known by social workers who are able to put plans into place to reduce these risks. We continue to build on a track record of establishing strong relationships with our young people who are receiving a service. Our low staff turnover in this team means that those relationships can be long-standing and are maintained throughout the key transitions, however we consider the need of each child rather than set an arbitrary age of transition. Our care leavers receive on-going support to help them understand and access their life choices.

3.45 Strategy meetings are held when young people go missing or are deemed at risk of offending, drug or alcohol misuse or with sexual exploitation. Catch 22 provides a commissioned drug and alcohol misuse service. Other independent agencies such as the Wimbledon Guild are used where appropriate to provide a broader more holistic counselling services. This

approach provides young people choice rather than a direct referral to a one size fits all service.

- 3.46 Care leavers' pathway plans address the needs of our young people and are updated when their circumstances change. Young people have access to facilitated independence programmes designed to support ambitions and maximize their potential in early adulthood - these intentions are captured in their pathway plans. Pathway plans are developed in consultation with young people. Comments from young people are captured in the plans which are drafted over a two/three week period to ensure that they capture and fully detail understanding of the young person's development, ambitions and goals. All young people are offered a copy of this care plan when completed. Merton also issue "My guide to independence" and "Keys to the future" to every young person which provides guidance in relation to entitlements and the care leaver offer. Pathway plans are updated every six months as a minimum and when circumstances change where relevant.
- 3.47 In the case of young people with disabilities or continuing care needs, careful transition and pathway planning is undertaken between the children with disabilities social work team and the social work transition team located in Adult Social Care. Development work has been undertaken working across children's social care, adult social care and health to identify key transition points and access to services for children with complex disabilities and other health needs. Clear interim processes are in place until permanent planning structures emerge from cross agency work on implementing the requirements of the new Children and Families Act.
- 3.48 All of our looked after young people aged 16 and 17 are encouraged to remain in care until their 18th birthday where this is in their best interest. We only discharge these young people from care if they insist following an assessment of risk and needs or when they are being successfully rehabilitated home. Our young people understand that we will act to support their transition into adulthood at least until they are 21 and, where necessary, until they are 25. We frequently receive contact from care leavers for on-going general guidance and support.
- 3.49 **Health needs of care leavers** – The health needs of care leavers are supported by social workers, support workers, accommodation key workers and carers. Young people receive advice and guidance from these workers in relation to their physical and emotional health needs ensuring these are addressed in a timely manner and do not impact on a young person's capacity to access education, employment and training. Social workers aim to ensure that all young people are registered with their local GP and dentist and that these are relocated when the young person moves. Social workers will liaise with health visitors, community paediatrics, GPs and midwives in support of young care leaving parents. Independent living workshops held cover issues such as relationships including sexual relationships and healthy eating. Attendance is required as part of young people's pathway plans to support their preparation for independence. Care leavers are provided with "Leaving Care Summaries" to support their understanding of their health histories and to provide information they will need as young adults. Young people in Merton are asked how they would prefer to receive these

summaries with options including electronically, via email or post. A copy is always kept on young people's files. Care leavers are also provided with all key documents they need to begin their lives as young adults including, for example, national insurance numbers, birth certificates and passports where available.

- 3.50 **Maximising life chances for care leavers** – Independence workshops are run for 16+ young people during holiday periods covering areas such as budgeting, careers, cooking and DIY to develop the skills and confidence they need to maximise their chances of successful transition to adulthood. Welfare benefits advice is provided by a specialist officer. Take up and feedback on these workshops and advice service is good. Young people in semi-independent accommodation are provided with support to address various aspects of their skills development. Looked after children and care leavers are strongly encouraged to participate in their communities and make their voices heard. A number of young people have participated in volunteering through Merton's Volunteer Centre.
- 3.51 **Care leavers and housing** – We have a good range of accommodation options for young people including strong links with providers of supported lodgings. Our approach to housing gives weight to a young person's views about the timing of moves to greater independence. During 2014/15, our Care Leavers Task and Finish group focused on a number of key issues for Care Leavers which were identified as areas for improvement. These included a focus on the commissioning of specialist support provided within the housing provision for more vulnerable care leavers such as those with substance misuse issues or those involved within the criminal justice system.
- 3.52 There has been a rise in young people becoming looked after at age 16 and 17 under the Southwark judgement and unaccompanied asylum seeker children which has resulted in the need to look at development of a joint housing/social care response to ensure a number of housing and support options are available to young people presenting as homeless. Management action is on-going in this respect.
- 3.53 At the end of 2014/15, 81% of our care leavers were living in suitable accommodation - this equates to 71 of a total relevant cohort of 93 (aged 19, 20 and 21). This is better than 66% in 2013/14 and better than the national average of 80% (2013/14). In 2014/15, of those in appropriate accommodation 28% were living in semi-independent accommodation, 5% were in supported lodgings, 18% were living independently and 12% were living with parents or relatives. It is of note that Merton does not use B&B accommodation for care leavers.
- 3.54 Merton has a long 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 accommodation officers working in the 14+ team. This service is well received by both our young people and our relevant carers. 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 this function from aged 16 to 21 depending on need.

- 3.55 Young people are supported to apply for permanent social housing and Merton's housing; the policy includes a quota for 20 care leavers. When a young person is offered a permanent property, the 14+ team will assist to ensure that the property is up to a suitable standard and care leavers are provided with a setting up allowance of £2000.
- 3.56 Where it is identified that a young person is at risk of a tenancy breakdown, the 14+ team will seek to mitigate the issues arising and on occasion seek to mediate with housing providers. Support can include outreach support from key workers, independent living skills workshops and support with budgeting so that a young person can sustain their tenancy wherever possible.
- 3.57 **Care leavers and education and employment opportunities** – There is a strong emphasis on further education, training and employment for all looked after children in Merton. Our 2014/15 task and finish group focused on improving our understanding of this cohort of children. In 2014/15, 44% of our care leavers (aged 19, 20 and 21) were in education, employment or training - this is better than the national average of 39% (2014/15) but below our aspirations for our young people and previous outcomes (2011/12, 70%). We renewed our focus through our task and finish group with this NEET cohort during 2014/15 by allocating new resources to provide targeted NEET support to improve this outcome. This extra resource is already beginning to have an impact on young people's outcomes. Many of the young people targeted for this bespoke support are engaging well, including submitting applications for further education in the next academic year. Additional employability workshops have been run, with young people being supported with advice on career planning and producing a CV.
- 3.58 All young people discuss education and career planning with their social workers as part of the Pathway Planning process. These are reviewed as a minimum every six months. Where the young person has an established education pathway, this is supported by the social worker or support worker to encourage and maintain. This can include financial support such as a £200 book allowance or travel fares. Our Virtual School provides a range of support to care leavers including individual tuition and support at specific times such as applications to college and universities. Those care leavers with SEN are offered particular support.
- 3.60 Merton is also developing apprenticeship and work experience offers for care leavers to work in the Council and working with colleges at the Job Centre and the broader partnership. During 2013/14, we had two care leavers working in CSF, both of whom have recently left to go on to university. In 2014/15, we recruited another one of our care leavers as a participation apprentice in support of the Children in Care Council and broader 'user voice' LAC activity.

4 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

- 4.1. None for the purposes of this report.

5 TIMETABLE

5.1. N/A

6 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

6.1. The increase in children in care is impacting on a range of budgets across the CSF department, most significantly on placements and staffing. The pressures on placements alone amount to £1m although these have been partially offset during 2015/16 by underspends elsewhere. These underspends will not reoccur in 2016/17.

7 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

7.1. The council has extensive legal duties with regard to LAC and care leavers and is the legal parent to these children and young people.

8 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

8.1. We are dedicated to narrowing the gaps in outcomes between our LAC and care leavers and their more advantaged peers.

9 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

9.1. Children entering the care system become looked after and can be eligible for leaving care services.

10 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

10.1. Social workers have to utilise a range of risk assessment and management tools both within child protection and looked after children's work.

11 APPENDICES – THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS ARE TO BE PUBLISHED WITH THIS REPORT AND FORM PART OF THE REPORT

- LAC and Care leaver Cohort review Nov 2015 (redacted)
- Care Leaver Strategy 2015-18
- LAC Strategy 2015-18
- Virtual School Annual report 2014-2015

12 BACKGROUND PAPERS

12.1. None