



**London Borough of Merton  
Corporate Parenting Board  
Annual Report  
2019/2020**

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## **I. Executive Summary**

The period covered in the report, from April 2019 to March 2020, saw significant changes in the structure and leadership of Children's Social Care services and ended with the UK entering the first national Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. It is through times of transition and crises that vulnerable people are at risk of becoming even more vulnerable. In our society, there are very few less vulnerable people than the children and young people who enter the care of local authorities. Fortunately, Merton has a strong corporate parenting ethos that ensures our children in care and care experienced young people's needs are always prioritised. Despite these contextual changes, Merton has continued to provide a good service to our children in care and care experienced young people.

Our numbers of children in care and demographics have mostly remained stable and consistent with the previous reporting year. Whilst the overall number of children in care has remained steady over the last 5-years, there is a clear trajectory of increasing numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and the percentage they make up of the overall children in care population. Work is underway to combine the current separate strategies, one for children in care and the other for care experienced young people, to develop a single Corporate Parenting Strategy with the 6-pledges aligning to the 6-outcomes of the Children and Young People's Plan 2019 - 23.

2019 saw the regionalisation of South London local authorities adoption services finally come to fruition with the formation of Adopt London South. The transfer of our adoption functions has seen many teething issues, but we continue to work hard alongside our partners to ensure children's early permanence plans are achieved. Improvements have been made to the way we plan and progress permanence for our children in long term foster care, and we continue to have strong relationships with our health and education colleagues to meet children and young people's needs. Whilst there has been some pockets of participation activity and children's voices are being heard through the work and services of professionals in their network, we have struggled to establish a functioning children in care council. Establishing a children in care council and a range of options to gather the voice of the child to influence service direction is a priority. Participation of children and young people is now a standing agenda item for the Corporate Parenting Board and the Education and Early Help Division have developed an action plan to progress the participation of children in our care and care experienced young adults.

## **II. Introduction**

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the services delivered to Merton's children in care and care experienced young people. The report covers the performance and comparative data for the 2019/2020 reporting year.

### ***The Corporate Parenting Board***

The main purpose of corporate parenting boards is to ensure and monitor how the Local Authority are applying the 7 principles of corporate parenting set out in *Section 1 of the*

*Children and Social Work Act 2017*<sup>1</sup>. This legislation is accompanied by the DFE statutory guidance for local authorities - *Applying corporate parenting principles to looked-after children and care leavers*<sup>2</sup>. The guidance encourages corporate parenting boards and local authorities to assess and monitor the quality of services through understanding the experience of the children and young people accessing them.

Merton's corporate parenting board is held 4 times a year and is comprised of care experienced young people, elected members, senior managers from across the council, the NHS, and the CCG. It is chaired by the council's Chief Executive, Ged Curran, which promotes a strong corporate parenting ethos across the Council and the wider children's partnership.

## **Context**

There were some significant changes in key positions and structure of the services working for our children in care and care experienced young people during the 2019/2020 reporting year.

El Mayhew joined as the permanent Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion in July 2019, following a 4-month period of interim arrangements after the departure of the previous Assistant Director in March 2019. At this time there were two Heads of Service positions; one for Access to Resources which was being covered by a locum senior manager, and the other for Permanency, Looked After Children and Care Leavers. In April 2019, the decision was made to reduce the numbers of Heads of Services across Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion Division to realise savings.

In July 2019, arrangements were made to temporarily relocate services within the portfolio of the locum senior manager pending the outcomes of the planned Early Help re-organisation and a review of the Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion structure. The interim arrangements relevant to children in care and care experienced young people were:

- the 14+ Service moved from the Permanency, Looked After Children and Care Leavers Service into the Adolescent and Family Services portfolio
- The Fostering and Access to Resources Teams were moved into a newly created Children in Care and Resources portfolio

In November 2019, the Head of Service for the Children in Care and Resources Service left Merton's employment. David Michael was permanently appointed to this post and joined the Service in January 2020.

In the spring of 2020 Councillor Eleanor Stringer was appointed as the Cabinet Member for Children and Education.

At the end of the reporting year, after the emergence of Covid-19, the UK went into its first national lockdown on the 23 March 2020.

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<sup>1</sup> [Children and Social Work Act 2017 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk)

<sup>2</sup> [Applying corporate parenting principles to looked-after children and care leavers - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

## ***Update of the priorities identified in the 2018-2019 annual report***

The priorities from last year's report were recognised at the time of writing in January 2020. This provided only 2-months in the 2019/2020 reporting year to make improvements and of course, with the first national lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic commencing in late March 2020, our priorities understandably shifted. Whilst some progress on the 4 identified priorities have been made in the 2020 calendar year, those priorities have now been merged into the Corporate Parenting Action Plan which is monitored by the Corporate Parenting Board. Future corporate parenting annual reports will be based on the commitments made in the Corporate Parenting Strategy. This will ensure alignment of strategic intent and the actions taken to achieve these ambitions.

Four actions and their desired impacts were identified in last year's report; below outlines the progress of these action.

### **Action 1) Improve the number of children experiencing placement stability**

Desired impact

- Greater service oversight and focus on matching long term for those children who remain in care.
- Early identification of placements likely to disrupt.
- Partnership working to stabilise placements

Progress: - Work started at pace to improve our practice around permanency at the start of the 2020 calendar year and has continued throughout the pandemic. Regular permanency planning meetings were introduced for children with a care plan of long-term foster care who have not yet been matched and are living with their long-term foster family. These multi-agency meetings, alongside robust tracking arrangements, has improved oversight, strengthened partnership working within the child's network, and helped professionals to intervene earlier to stabilise homes through having a greater understanding of the relationships within the household and the needs of the child.

### **Action 2) Improve the take up of Strength and Difficulty Questionnaires (SDQ) with children looked after and young people.**

Desired impact

- Increased number of children with SDQ taking place
- Emotional wellbeing will be identified earlier and action plans in place to address areas of concern.
- Improved emotional wellbeing, referral, and access to services.

Progress: – Unfortunately, during 2019/20 we were not able to make the desired progress and impact. In large parts this was a result of the significant changes to leadership experienced during 2019/20. The action remains a priority for 20/21.

### **Action 3) Improve outcomes for young people who are Not in Education Employment or Training ('NEET') by raising corporate aspirations**

Desired outcomes –

- Improved outcomes for young people who are 'NEET.'
- Increased number of young people engaging in Education, Employment and Training
- Improved corporate aspirations across service areas
- Maximising resources and opportunities

Progress: In this reporting year 2020, we have strenuously supported young people to increase their attainment both through employment and education against a challenging coronavirus pandemic backdrop. The opportunities to seek employment have decreased and there has been an impact on the emotional, mental health and peer networks for some young people. The Service and the Virtual School continue to explore new opportunities for alternative training routes; apprenticeships and work experience as well as providing advice, support and equipment, such as laptops, to support virtual education. Increasing the numbers of young people in education or employment remains an ongoing priority for 2021.

#### **Action 4) Improve preparation for independence for Care Leavers**

Desired outcomes

- Pathway plans will identify clear routes and objectives to transition from dependent to independent
- Care leavers will have access to a housing pathway that will meet their need.
- Less reliance on Semi Independent Accommodation.

Progress: A draft proposed protocol setting out Merton's Local Offer of access to social housing for care experienced young adults has been shared with Housing colleagues. This work will form part of the wider development of Merton's Housing Strategy. The Semi-Independent Accommodation Panel continues to review all young adults eligible for social housing to identify the necessary actions to secure and support tenancies.

In the reporting year 2020, we have strengthened the focus and aspirations for our young people in preparing for independence and developing self-care skills. The quality of Pathway Plans has been reviewed as part of the collaborative audit cycle and is driving continued improvements, for example earlier planning for transition to adulthood. For young people with additional needs, work is ongoing with colleagues from Adult services and SEND teams to further develop the transition pathway.

#### ***Merton's pledge to our children and young people***

In 2018/2019, we published 2 strategies; one for our children in care and another for our young people with care experience both contained separate pledges. However, upon reflection and as part of our improvement work, we concluded that it would be more effective if we merged the two strategies to reflect the joint up approach of our service delivery. Work is underway to create a singular Corporate Parenting Strategy and Action Plan based around the six pledges below which mirrors the desired outcomes for all Merton's young residents that were developed by our Young Inspectors and the Children's Trust and published in the Children and Young People's Plan 2019 - 23.

Corporate Parenting Pledges	Children's Trust Outcome
Your voice will be heard, what you say matters.	Getting involved, having a say.
You will have somewhere safe to call home.	Staying safe.
We will help you with your worries and fears.	Being Healthy
We will do the best we can to support you, so you can do your best at school, have hobbies, interests and time for fun.	Enjoying and achieving.
We will make sure you have people in your life who are important to you and someone you can trust.	My Merton.
We support you to learn how to take care of yourself and we will be there for you, if you need us, right up until you are an adult aged 25.	Becoming independent.

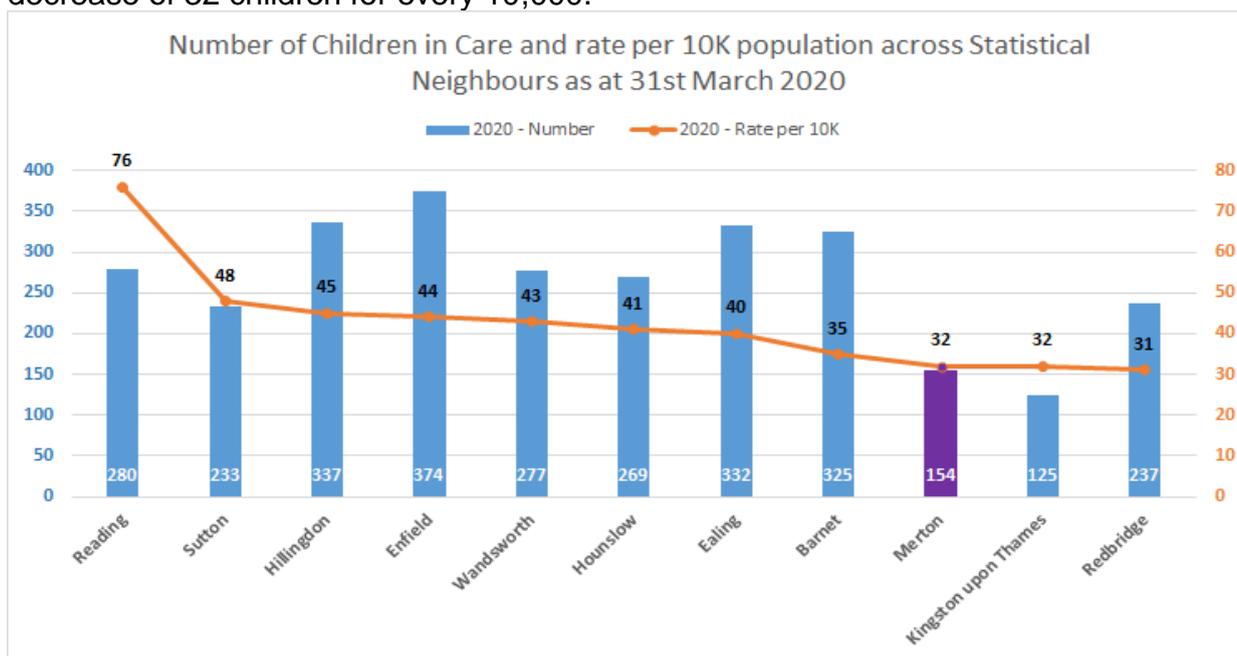
## Corporate Parenting Performance Activity 2018-19

### Numbers and Rates of Children in Care as of 31<sup>st</sup> March

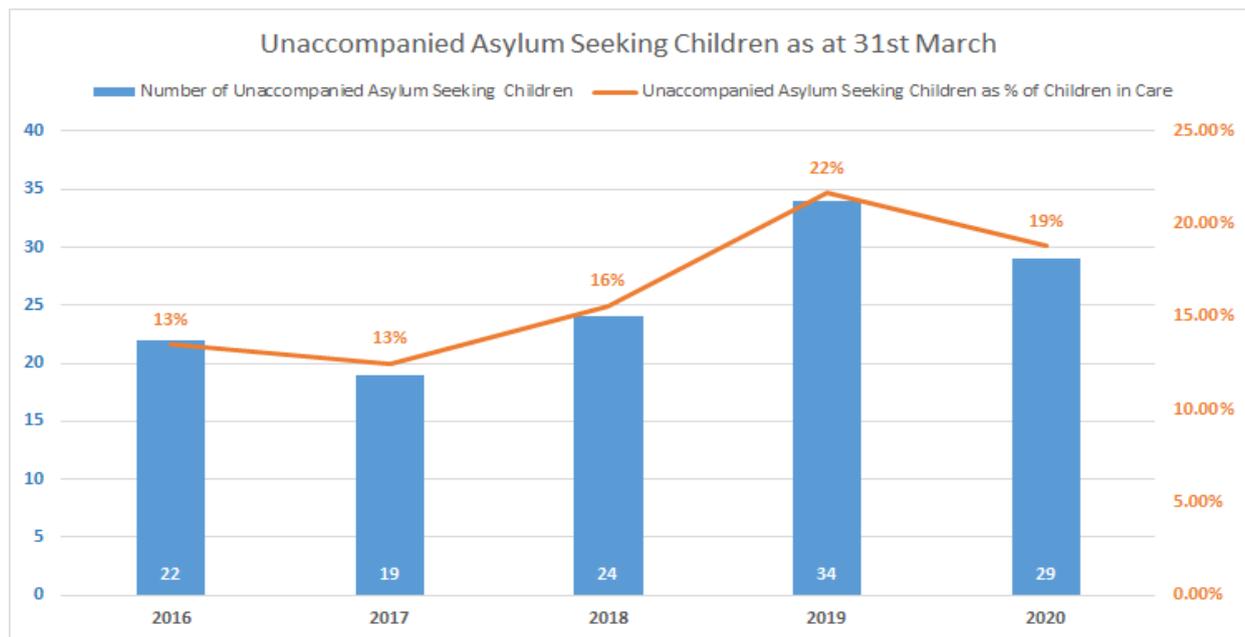
	2016		2017		2018		2019		2020	
	Number	Rate / 10K								
<b>Merton</b>	163	35	152	33	154	33	157	33	154	32
<b>London</b>	9860	51	9900	50	9890	49	10030	50	10010	49
<b>National</b>	70400	60	72590	62	75420	64	78150	65	80080	67

England and London totals are rounded to the nearest 10

The numbers of children Merton has in care over the last 5-years as remained stable. This is in line with London overall but in contrast with the national picture which has seen a significant increase in the numbers of children entering the care system. Interestingly, numbers in Merton and London have remained stable even though there has been an increase in population. This is highlighted in the above graph where in 2017, Merton had 152 children in care with a rate of 33 for every 10,000 children, whereas in 2020, we had a slight increase to 154 with a decrease of 32 children for every 10,000.



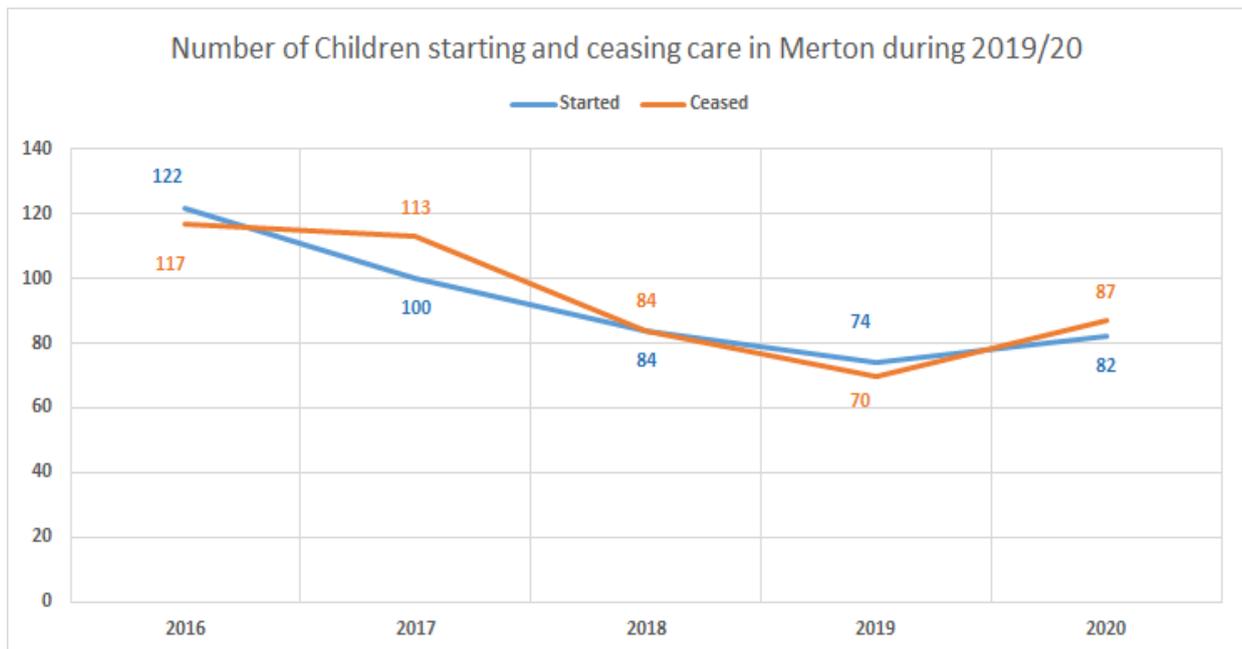
The above table compares Merton with our statistical neighbours with regards to the numbers of children we have in care per every 10,000 children. We are significantly lower than most the other boroughs in the table. All the London boroughs in the table (Reading is not a London LA) are below the London average of 49 per 10,000 children. Whilst there may be many contributing factors to this, we know that there is a strong link between poverty and involvement with children’s social care. A recent report on poverty from Trust for London shows that, except for Sutton, Merton and Kingston upon Thames have the lowest rates of poverty, and the lowest proportion of children living in relative low-income households, in comparison to every other London borough in the above table<sup>3</sup>.



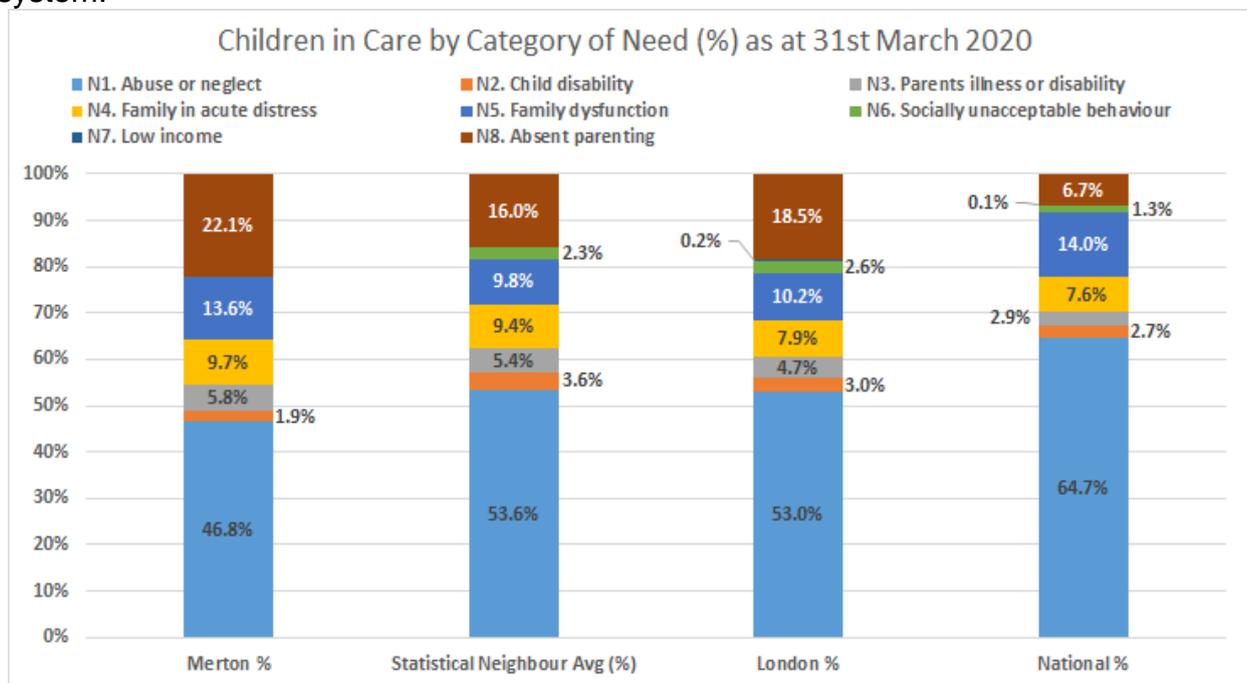
Whilst there was a slight drop in the overall number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children on 31/03/2020 in comparison to the previous year, the above graph shows an upward trajectory in the numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children entering our care and the proportion of the overall cohort they make.

Merton remains part of the pan-London rota scheme agreed by the Association of London Directors of Children’s Services (ALDCS) to ensure equal distribution of unaccompanied asylum seeking 16-and 17-year-olds in London. In 2016 the Government introduced the National Transfer Scheme to ensure that individual authorities did not need to accommodate more unaccompanied minors than 0.07% of their overall child population. In April 2019, Merton was part of the pan-London Labour Group agreement to raise the ceiling for all London Labour Councils to 0.08%. For Merton, this equates to 38. In Merton we are proud of the service we provide to our unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people and have dedicated social workers with expertise in meeting their needs.

<sup>3</sup> [Londons Poverty Profile 2020.pdf \(digitaloceanspaces.com\)](https://www.digitaloceanspaces.com/Londons_Poverty_Profile_2020.pdf)

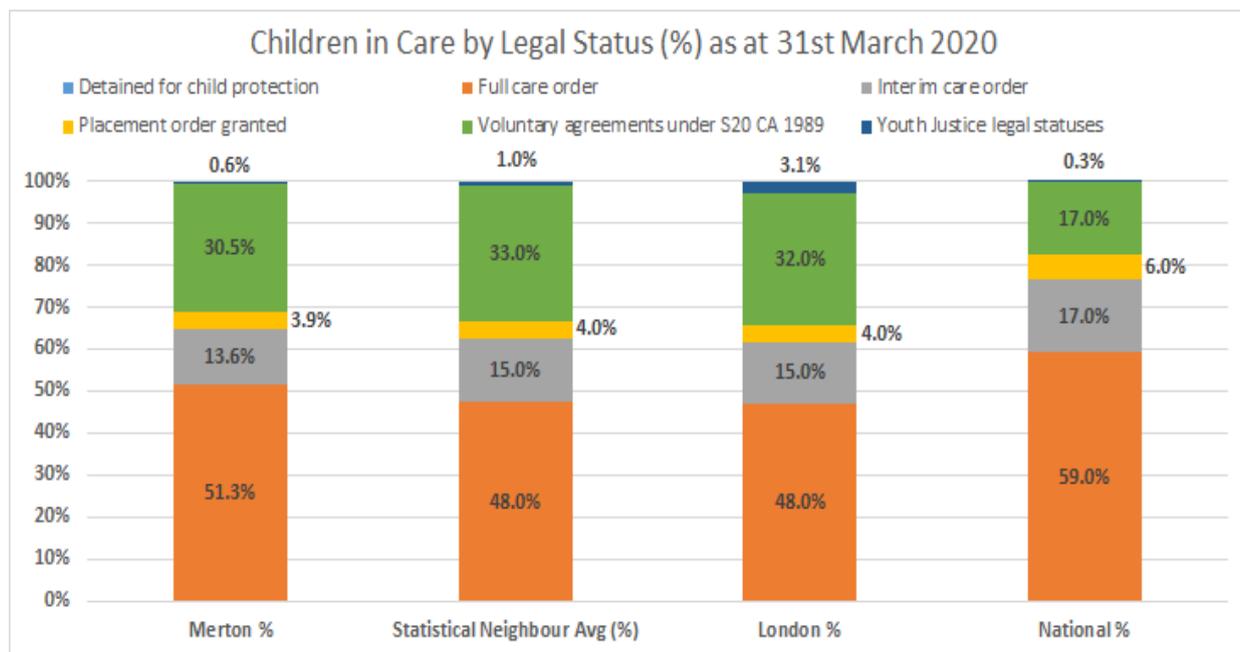


Whilst our overall numbers of children in care have remained stable there has been significant movement in the numbers of children entering and leaving the system. The most notable change between 2017 and 2018 coincided with the introduction of our practice model in 2017. The practice model blended Signs of Safety and Systemic Practice and focussed social work practice in Merton on working alongside families and their resources to identify support and increase safety for children. In 2018, the Positive Families Partnership Panel was launched which was a targeted Multi-Systemic Therapy/Functional Family Therapy project to work intensely with children aged between 11 and 16 years to prevent them from entering the care system.



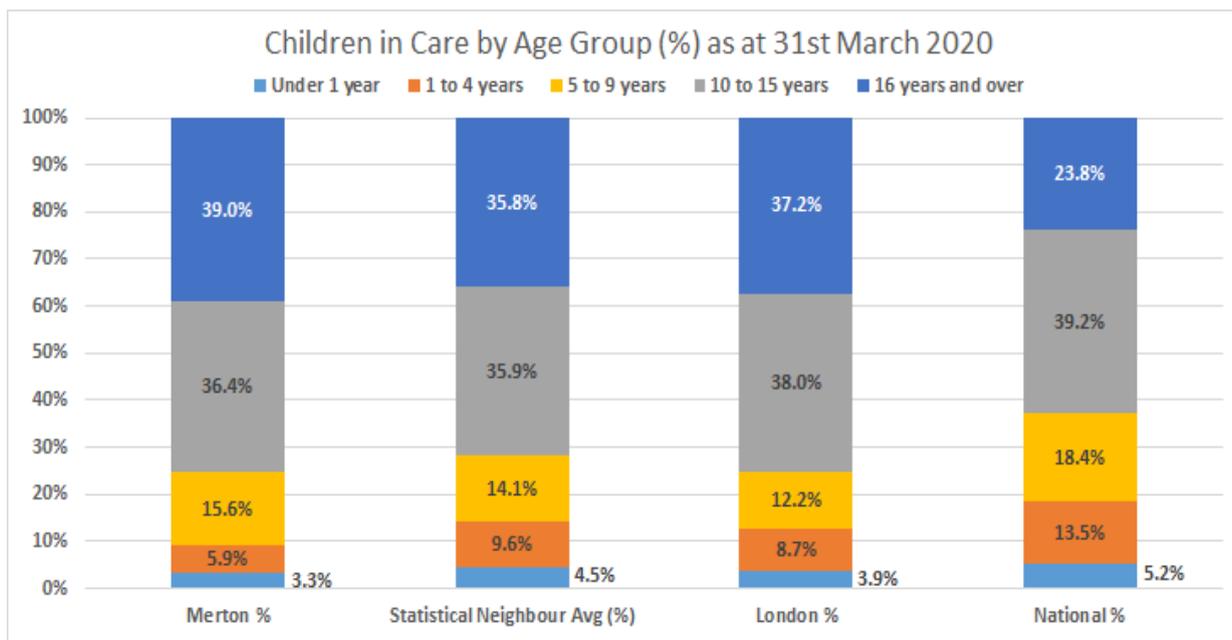
The above is a comparative graph showing the reasons why children entered care. The two categories where there is a statistically significant difference between Merton and the other 3

comparative tables are: abuse and neglect, and absent parenting. However, due to our relatively small numbers of children in care this can be misleading as 19% of our Children in Care cohort are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who are included in the 22.1% of children coded as having absent parents. The lower percentage of children entering care due to abuse and neglect may be attributable to the previously mentioned factor of the link between poverty and interaction between social care as well Merton's dedication to keep children living in their family network wherever it is safe enough to do so.

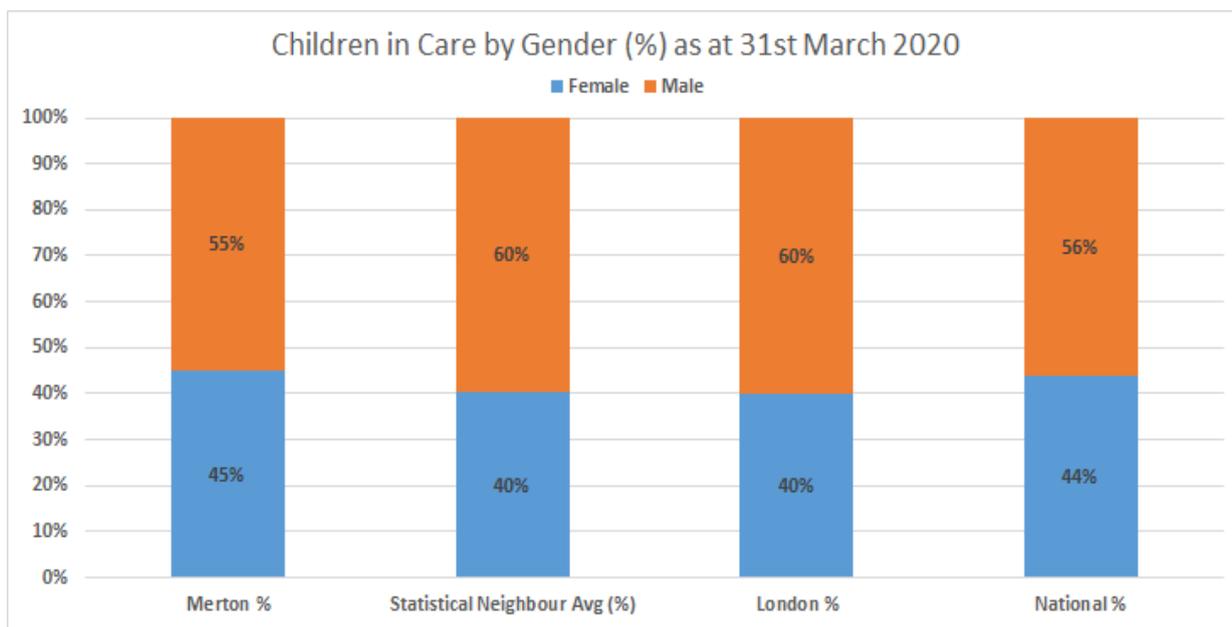


Merton's breakdown by legal status is in line with London and our statistical neighbours. We know that the north of England has seen a steeper increase of children entering care over the last few years and that London have a higher percentage of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (who are mostly accommodated under Section 20 voluntary agreements) in comparison to the rest of the UK. These two issues are key factors in the difference between London and the National breakdown above.

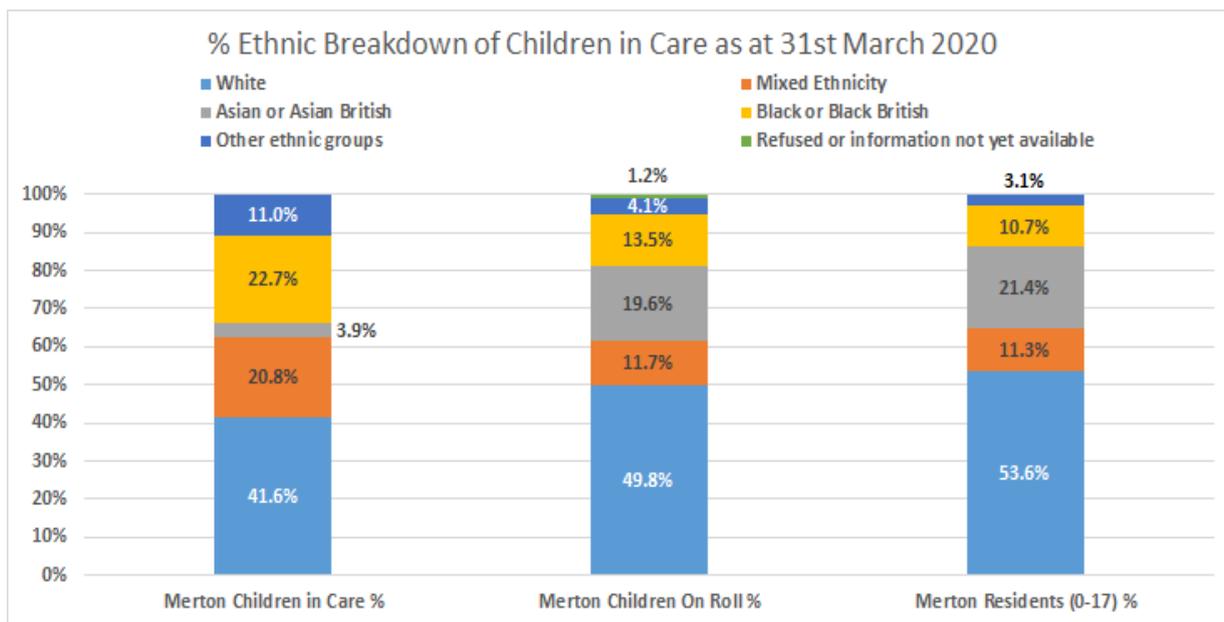
### III. Section 1: Demographics



Merton is in line with the national trend of seeing more children enter care in late childhood. This is particularly stark in London with some causal reasons being our duty towards unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, who are mostly 16 or 17 years of age, and the rise of contextual safeguarding concerns for adolescents.



Merton's ratio between male and female is in line with the national picture but slightly out of line with London. However, like the rest of London, Merton does have a significantly higher number of 16- and 17-year-old males entering the care system.



Black children and young adults are overrepresented in care. Conversely, children identifying from an Asian ethnicity are underrepresented. Both trends are reflected nationally. Whilst it is difficult to point to causal connections, the combination of factors in society including systemic disadvantage, systemic racism, and unwillingness from some cultures to report concerns and/or access services are likely to be underpinning factors. The over representation in 'other' ethnicities is due to our ongoing commitment to accept unaccompanied minors seeking refuge within the UK.

#### IV. Section 2: Care Processes

It is our strongly held value that children have the right and should grow up with their families. Our early help, child in need and child protection services strive to affect positive change within families and empower them to find their own sustainable solutions where children are safe and can thrive.

##### ***Pre-proceedings***

When we are very worried about the trajectory of children living with their families and our interventions have not been successful in supporting the family to make enough positive change, we will enter pre-proceedings as a last attempt to affect change and divert the need for court proceedings.

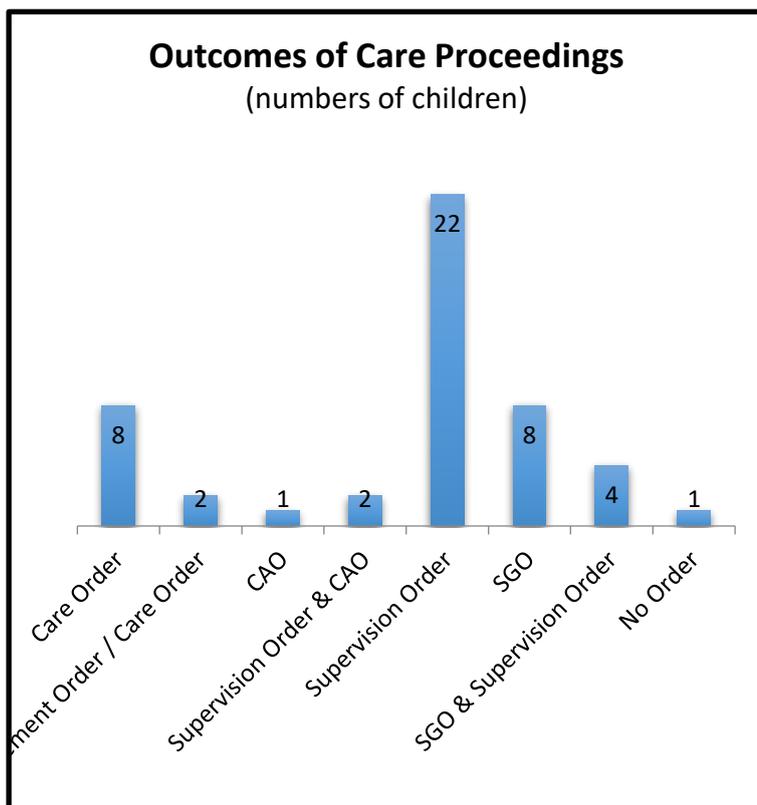
During the reporting year, we entered pre-proceedings for 14 families (24 children) which was comparable to the previous year (25 children). We achieved our goal of undertaking our pre-proceedings interventions in a more timely manner by reducing the average length of intervention from 25-weeks (in both 2017/18 & 2018/19) to 19 weeks. During the year, 13 families concluded pre-proceedings with 46% of families successfully stepping down. 54% of the families needed to escalate to proceedings to ensure the child's safety.

One of the aims of entering pre-proceedings is to minimise the length of time spent in the court arena if proceedings are issued. This is achieved through undertaking assessments of parents

as well as identifying and assessing other family and people connected to the children who may be able to provide them care. This is an area we still need to work on as our performance shows that children subject to pre-proceedings spent 3 weeks longer in court proceedings compared to children who were not subjected to pre-proceedings (38-weeks to 35 weeks).

### Care proceedings

During the reporting year, we issued proceedings for 24 families (48 children). This was a significant decrease from the previous year when proceedings were issued for 31 families (63 children). During the same period, we concluded proceedings for 22 families (48 children).



Of the 48 children we concluded proceedings for, all but 11 achieved permanence within their immediate or extended family network. Of these 11 children, 2 were granted Placement Orders (meaning that we would look to find a family to adopt them) and one concluded with no order (a 17-year-old who we collaboratively agreed to accommodate under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989 (voluntary agreement) and provide semi-independent accommodation for). 15 of the children found permanence with a person connected to their network either through a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) or Child Arrangements Order (CAO).

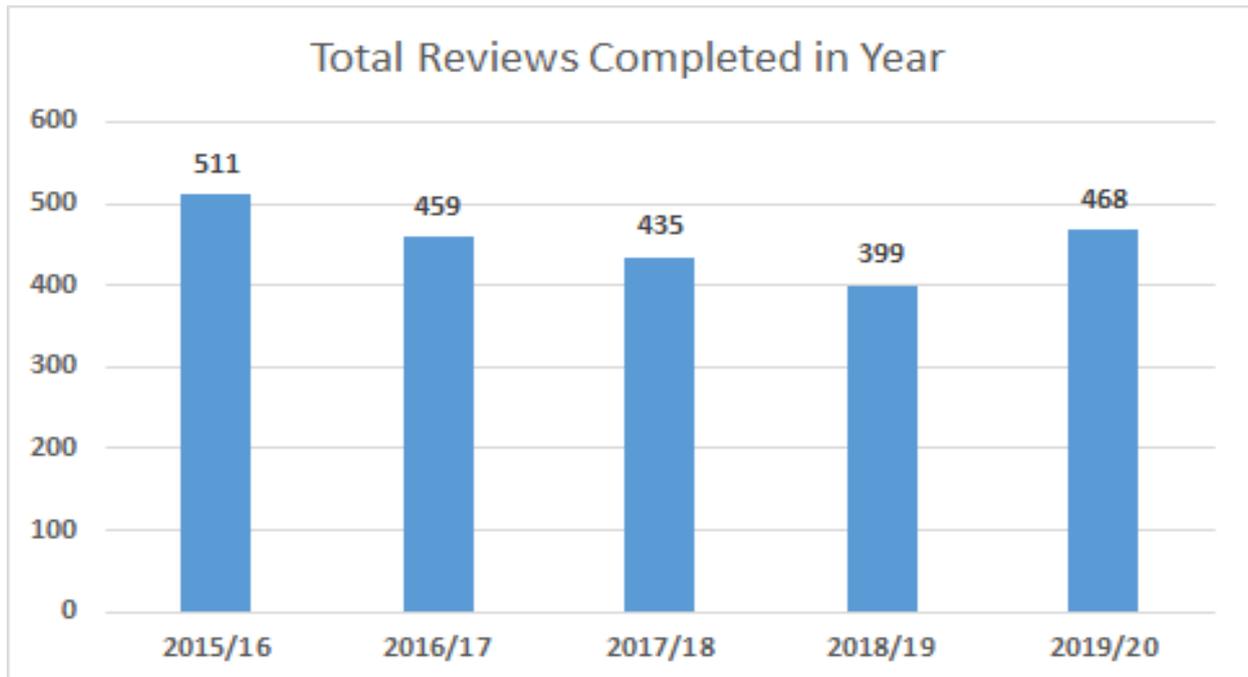
This year saw a significantly high number of Supervision Orders granted with an increase of 11 from the previous year. 6 were combined with either a Special Guardianship or Child Arrangements Order. The remaining 22 Supervision Orders, meaning that the child returned home to the care of their parents, were only from 8 sets of proceedings (a set of proceedings will usually include all the children in a family). With such small numbers, small changes to patterns can sometimes skew performance figures.

The national target is to conclude proceedings within 26 weeks. Merton's average for the proceedings concluded was 36-weeks which was a slight increase from the previous reporting year. There are many reasons why proceedings can extend beyond the planned 26 weeks from connected persons putting themselves forward to care for children at a late stage to the capacity of the courts around scheduling hearings in timescales. Performance information provided by the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) showed that we performed slightly better than other Local Authorities sharing the West London Family Cour. However, court proceedings tend to be slightly longer when compared to London Authorities assigned to other courts. This suggests that capacity in the West London Family Court as a potential cause for the duration of court proceedings.

### **Family Drug and Alcohol Court (FDAC)**

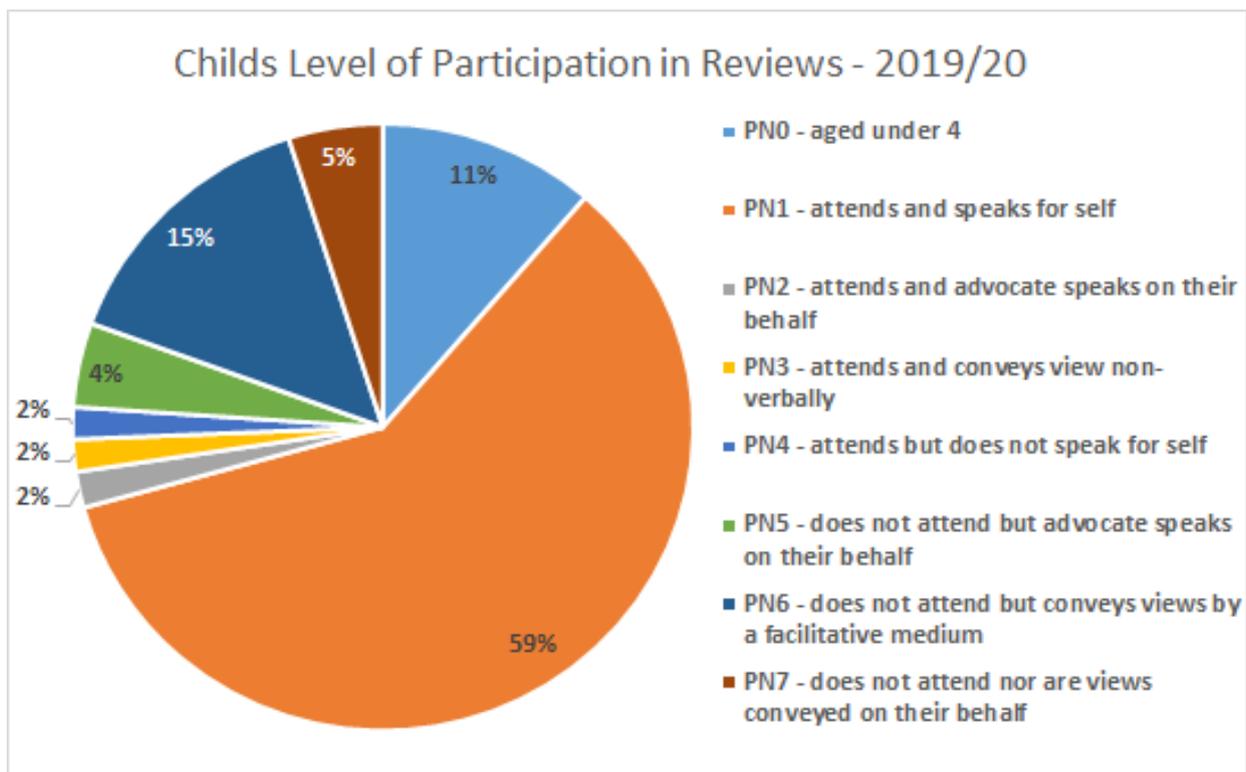
In 2019, following a review of our families who had been referred to FDAC, the decision was made to not recommission the service when the contract ran out in January 2020. The FDAC reporting year was from January to December 2019. During this time, we entered pre-proceedings with 5 families (13-children) being supported by FDAC. Of these 5-families, 2 did not require care proceedings and 3 did.

### **Children in Care Reviews**



The above graph shows a high number of reviews were undertaken in the year which evidences a prominent level of oversight from the Independent Reviewing Service. The Annual IRO report stated that all reviews were held within statutory timescales.

The graph below shows that 95% of reviews had child participation of some form. 65% of reviews had the child in attendance with 24% of reviews not having the child attend. The remaining 11% were reviews for children under the age of 4.



## V. Section 3: Permanency and A Place to Call Home

'You will have somewhere safe to call home' is a Merton Corporate Parenting pledge which is central to us achieving our ambitions for our children and young people. Whenever it is possible and safe enough, we will strive to keep children within their family networks. Only when this is not possible will we look at adoption and if this is not achievable or in the child's best interest, will we consider long term foster care.

### **Adoption**

Following the central government mandate to regionalise adoption services, on 01/07/2019, most of Merton's adoption functions were transferred to Adopt London South alongside eight other South London local authorities. This transition to regionalisation has been challenging for all involved; however, we have continued to work closely with our partners and Adopt London South to achieve resolution to the many teething issues which have arisen. Merton is required to remain a registered Adoption Agency as the children's social work teams retain the child-related duties of the adoption process. A designated Permanency Lead role has been created to provide a formal link with Adopt London South and track the progression of children's plans. The post is positioned in the Quality Assurance and Practice Development Service and also acts as the Fostering Panel advisor. There is a good relationship between Merton's Permanency Lead and the Adopt London South family finder who is linked to Merton.

During the year, 6 children were adopted; 1 of whom was adopted by their foster carer. The average time between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive families was 448 days. This was better than the 2019 national average (578 days) but slightly longer than the

England average of 363 days<sup>4</sup>. Positively, 4 of the 6 children adopted were from a black, Asian or minority ethnic community and the average time for these 4 children was 285 days between entering care and moving in with their adoptive parents. The average time between being granted authority from a court to place a child for adoption (Placement Order) and Merton deciding on a match was 377 days which was longer than both the national average (223 days) and the England average (170 days). We successfully placed 2 brother and sister groups together with their prospective adoptive parents.

### ***Children with plans for long term foster care.***

Over the last few years there have been several staffing and structure changes in Merton. This may have impacted on the focus of achieving permanence for children with plans of long-term foster care creating a back log of children who are not *matched* (to assess the suitability and support needs of a child and their prospective carers with regards to the child being a part of their family into adulthood). During the reporting year, one child was presented at the fostering panel for *matching* and there was no reporting mechanism on children's permanence status. However, this began to shift in late 2019 with the appointment of a Permanency Lead and by early 2020, once a stable management group had been established, the service began to establish a clear understanding of which children had achieved their permanence plan - meaning that they were living in a home where the plan is for them to stay until adulthood and this *match* had been approved by the Agency Decision Maker. January to March 2020 saw significant work to ensure that children had clear plans and that these were being reviewed every 6 weeks in Permanency Planning meetings. Tracking meetings were implemented to monitor progression alongside implementation of a Permanency Strategy, Action Plan and Practice Guidance. Merton's Permanency Lead, in conjunction with an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) delivered 9 staff workshops in February and March 2020 titled '*Understanding of Children and Young Peoples Routes and Options to Permanency*'. The workshops focused on permanency planning practice within Merton.

The focus on regular permanency planning meetings has helped social work teams become more proactive in their care planning for children and sharpened the focus on understanding the purpose of every care arrangement a child enters, whether that be:

- an emergency placement – when a child either enters care or moves at such short notice that an appropriate interim or long-term home can't be identified.
- an interim placement – where a child will live whilst decisions are made about where they will live in the long term, and/or if therapeutic interventions are required prior to a child being ready to move into their long-term home.
- a long-term placement – where it is our plan for the child to remain into adulthood. If they have not already been matched through the Fostering Panel and approved by the Agency Decision Maker, then the plan is to progress the matching process

Regular 6-weekly permanency planning meetings occur for every child unless they are living in and matched with their long-term carer. It is our practice standard that every child in care should have a Child's Permanence Report (CPR) which is a very thorough report of the child's history, parent's history, and their needs. This is the pivotal document family finders use to match children with potential carers and is presented to the Fostering Panel and then Agency Decision Maker to approve long-term fostering matches. The document is also important for

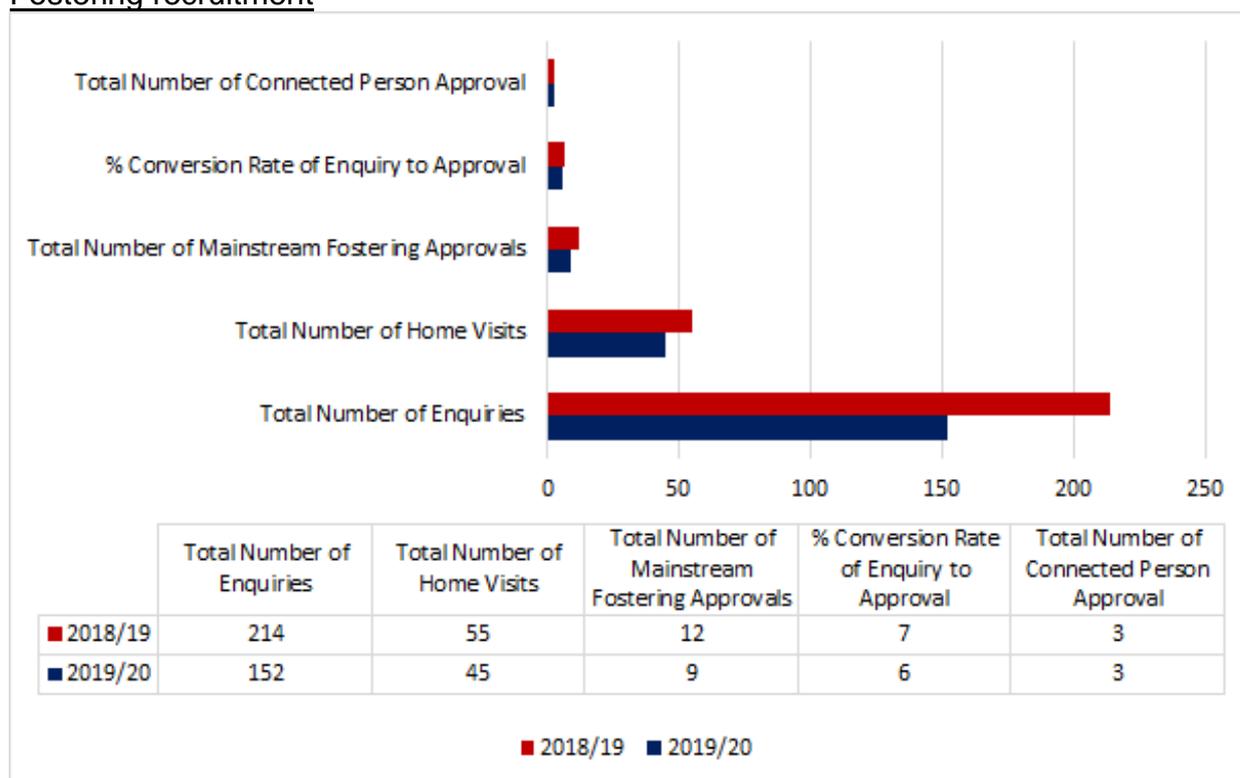
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<sup>4</sup><https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoiaZWJmZTdmNjctZmRiZS00NjRmLTg5YmMtNWFiZmZmZmQ4MDIiIiwidCI6ImZhZDI3N2M5LWM2MGEtNGRhMS1iNWYzLWlzYjhiMzRhODJmOSIsImMiOj9>

care experienced adults to read to help with understanding their history.

The historical back log of children who have neither been ‘matched’ nor have a CPR, remains a considerable challenge to the social work teams to find the capacity to complete this work alongside their normal demands of interventions and case management work. This challenge will be further compounded by the Covid 19 pandemic. However, we know 2020/2021 performance will show an increase in the number of children being *matched* and we expect this improvement to continue into 2021/2022 as we continue to embed good practice alongside addressing the historical backlog.

### Fostering recruitment



Performance in 2019/2020 dropped significantly in comparison to 2018/2019. Whilst there was disruption in the team’s structure linked to the regionalisation of adoption, the decrease in enquiries and approvals is directly attributable to the significant change in recruitment activity as a result of the 2019/2020 recruitment budget held by the corporate Communication Team being reduced as a saving. To be more efficient with our budget we have changed our Recruitment Strategy to utilise digital campaigns alongside some affordable promotional methods we know to be successful. We hope that these actions will secure an increase to enable us to achieve our ambitious target of 20 mainstream approvals.

### Fostering support

As of March 31st 2020, 85% of our children lived in foster homes with 52% of all children living in Merton’s own fostering provision. This was higher than our statistical neighbours who had 66% and 38% respectively<sup>5</sup> and reflects our strong commitment to have children living in family like homes wherever possible. Our strong fostering community is one of the fostering services

<sup>5</sup> [sufficiency strategy FINAL.pdf \(merton.gov.uk\)](#)

strengths. At the end of March 2020, we had 79 approved foster households (68 mainstream and 11 connected carer households).

In early March 2020, just prior to the Covid-19 pandemic impacting on the way we all live, we held our first fostering conference - *Developmental Trauma – An Overview with Children in Care in Mind*. The day was facilitated between our fostering service and in-house CAMHS team and was extremely well attended and received. Subject to Covid-19 restrictions, we plan to make this an annual event.

In addition, we have invested in an innovative approach to fostering called the *Mockingbird Family Model*. The model looks to replicate strong and supportive extended family networks for fostering households through creating a community with 6-10 other foster households. Academic evaluations of the model have shown that it improves placement stability and strengthens the relationships between carers, children and young people, fostering services and birth families<sup>6</sup>. Unfortunately, the project was paused following the first national Covid-19 lockdown in late March 2020, but we remain ambitious to progress this as the restrictions ease.

### ***Children and Young People living in other settings.***

Whilst it is our value that children should grow up in a family setting, we also realise that all children are unique, and that we must have a wide range of options to meet their needs. For the small number of children whose needs we were unable to meet in a family home, our Access to Resource Team (ART) will find a residential children's home with a good or outstanding Ofsted rating who will be able to prepare and support them to reintegrate back into a family home. As of March 31st, 2020, we had 2 children living in residential children's homes. This was a significant drop from the previous year (2018/2019) when we had 7 children in residential settings, which is more consistent with the number of children we would expect to see living in residential care. Decisions to place a child in residential settings are not taken lightly with an elevated level of scrutiny to ensure that we are making the right decision for individual children. First the child's professional network needs to agree that a residential home is in the child's best interest and that there are no foster homes or birth family options which could meet their needs. The Head of Service needs to endorse this recommendation with the final decision being made in consultation with the Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion.

For a small number of older children who have a proficient level of independent living skills and neither want or need family-based care or a children's home, supported independent accommodation (SIA) can be considered. SIA usually takes the form of a bedroom in a home with 2-3 other young people who share communal living spaces and have key work support. SIA provision is legal and is an important placement option for young people needing a steppingstone to having their own tenancy. However, as this provision is not regulated by Ofsted the variability in quality between provisions can be significant. Nationally, as a result of the shortage of residential care and foster homes, SIA provisions have received negative publicity because local authorities have sometimes used this provision to accommodate children who require care, but no appropriate regulated accommodation can be found. In Merton, we only ever have a small number of 16- and 17-year-olds living in SIA provision as part of their plan. At the end of this reporting year, we had 9 young people living in SIA provision. Merton only uses SIA provision for 16- and 17-year-olds which has 24-hour onsite support. Most Merton young people living in SIA are males. This is not unusual as nationally and locally in Merton there are higher numbers of teenage boys entering care than teenage

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<sup>6</sup> [Mockingbird programme \(thefosteringnetwork.org.uk\)](http://Mockingbirdprogramme(thefosteringnetwork.org.uk))

girls.

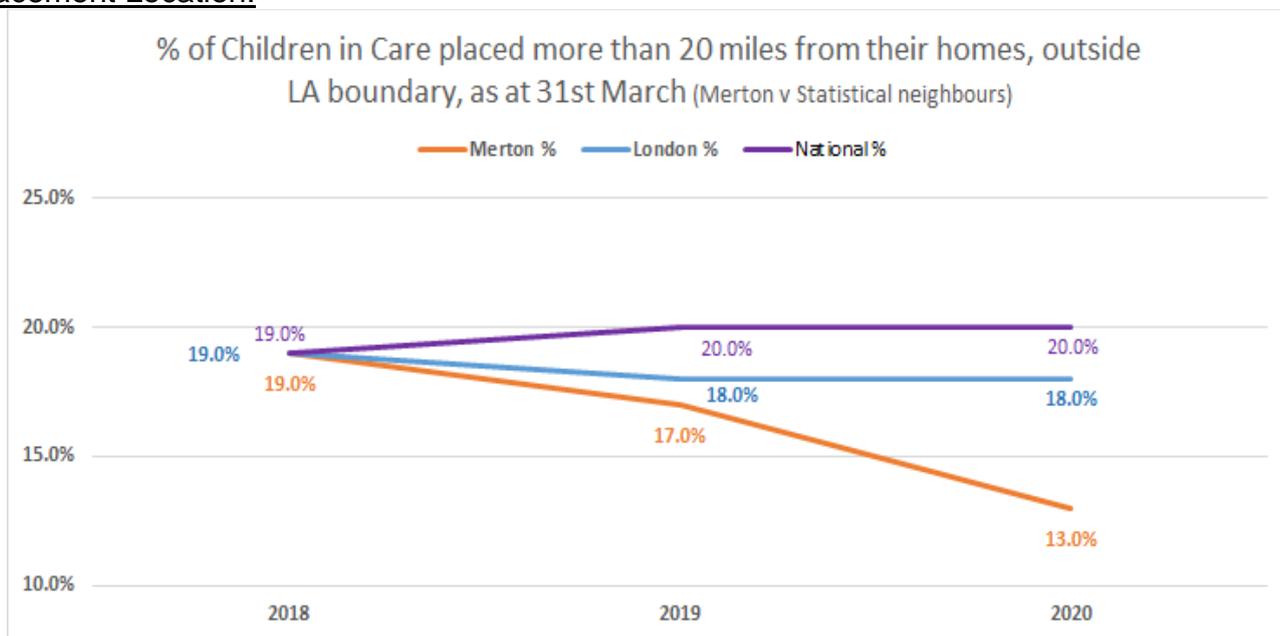
### ***How far our children live from Merton.***

We always try to keep children living either in or as close to Merton as possible. There are many advantages to this with the most important being to make ongoing meaningful contact between children and their birth families/networks easier to nurture. However, it is also advantageous to use Merton’s own resources to meet the needs of our children including schools, health, housing, and mental health services. For this reason, our Sufficiency Strategy is always focused on creating more placement options and greater capacity within Merton.

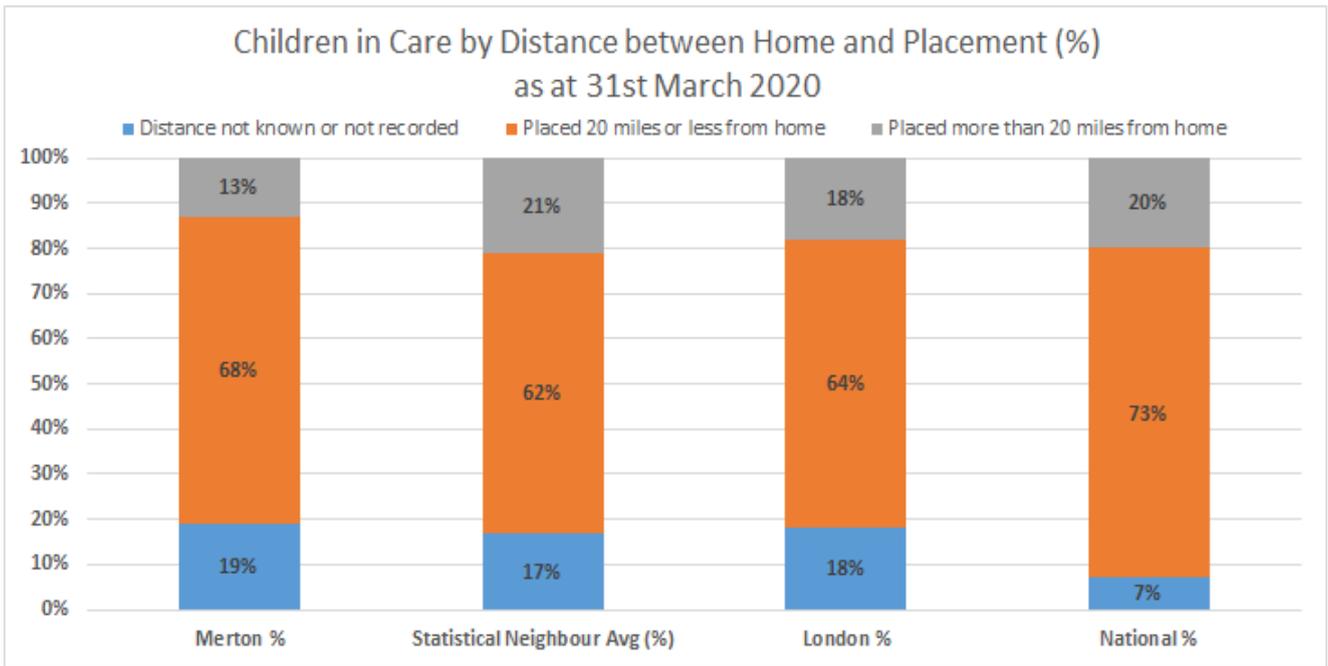
Unfortunately, sometimes it is either not possible or not in the child’s best interest to remain living in Merton. For some children, especially younger children who we are matching for long term foster care, we may prioritise the quality of a match between a child and foster parents over the geographical positioning. For some teenagers, we may not be able to protect them in a local community from adults wanting to exploit them and may decide that a period of living away will benefit the young person and help professionals to engage them in appropriate interventions. Unfortunately, for some children with very complex needs there are occasions where there is no local provision which can meet their needs.

We recognise the importance of having close relationships with neighbouring and other London boroughs to collectively tackle sufficiency and continue to be a part of the South London Commissioning Programme

#### Placement Location.



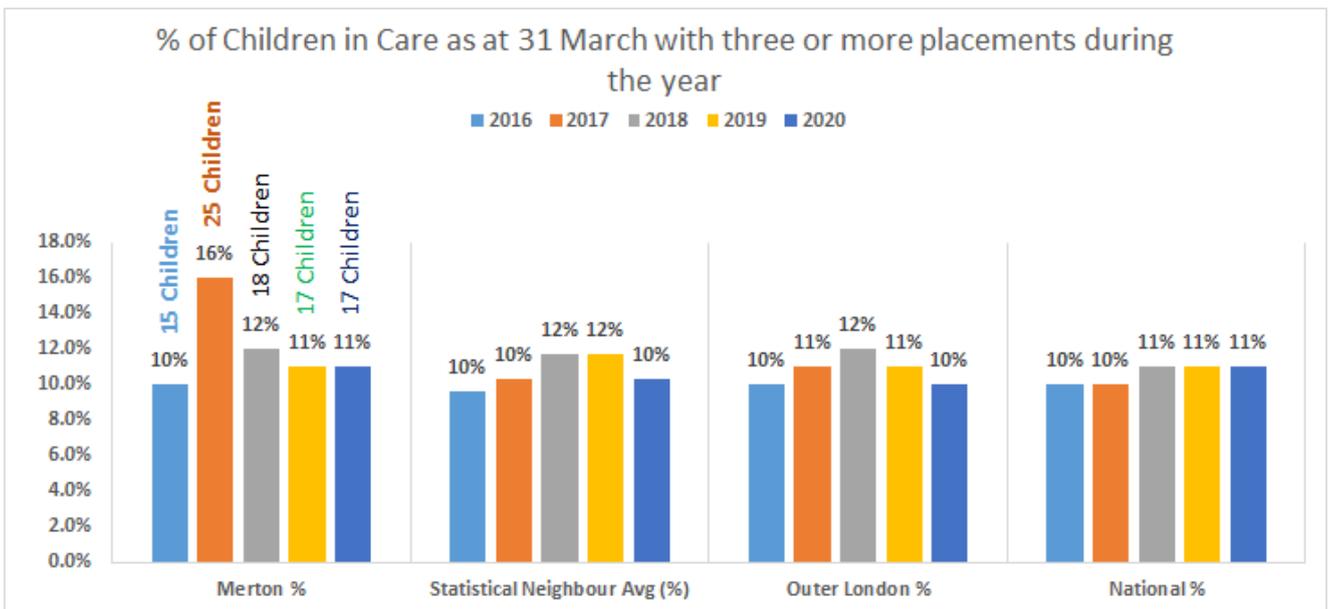
However, Merton is not alone in these challenges and the above graph shows that we are getting better at keeping children close to home. We are ambitious about continuing this trend through recruiting more fostering households who can care for the groups of our children who we know are harder to find homes for, such as teenagers, brother and sister groups, and parent and child foster homes. We are also exploring the option of creating our own in-house semi-independent accommodation (SIA) offer and registered children’s home provision. The table below shows that we perform well in comparison to our statistical neighbours, London, and nationally.

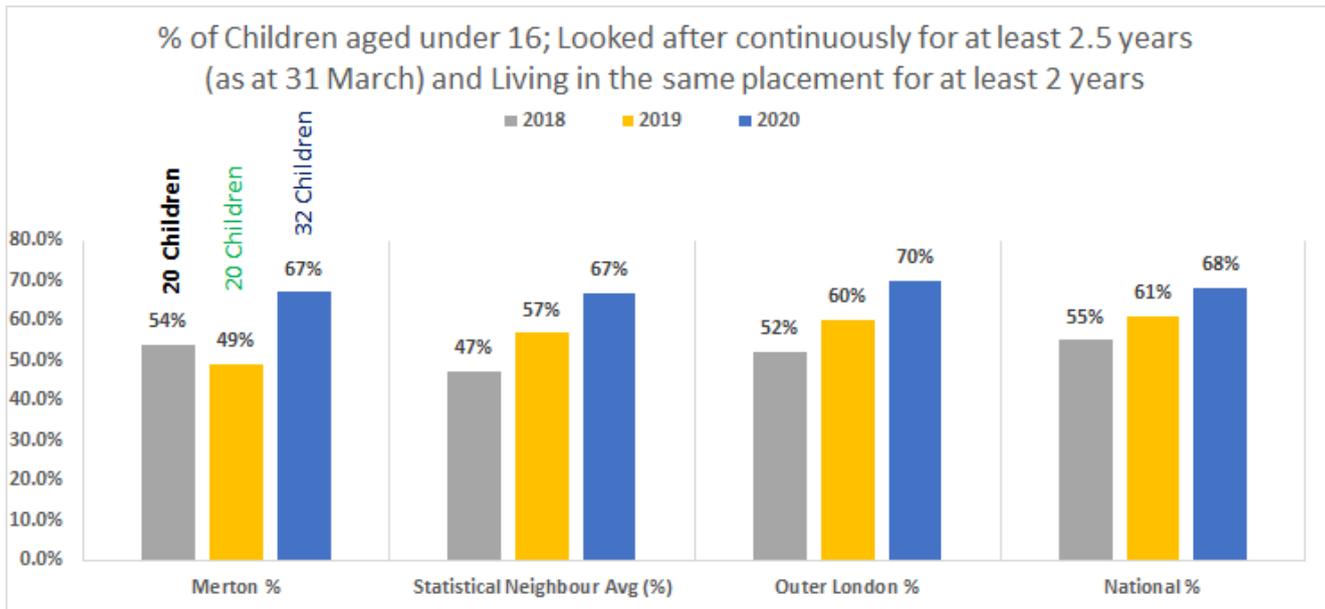


'Distance not known or not recorded' includes unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

### ***Placement stability***

All our efforts to improve how effectively we achieve permanence for children is based in the principle that providing a child with a stable, loving home is key to them thriving and growing up to live happy, full lives. The two graphs below showing DFE stability performance indicators comparing us with our statistical neighbours, London and nationally, show that we are in line with other local authorities.





Includes those placed for adoption, where their adoptive placement, together with their previous placement last for at least 2 years.

The above graph shows that there is a London and National improvement in the numbers of children living in the same home for more than two years. This highlights the importance of local authorities continuing to work together in order to improve placement sufficiency for children in care.

## VI. Section 4: Health

Initial Health Assessments (IHA) are commissioned from the Epsom and St Helier NHS Trust. They reported that 79 children had IHA during the reporting year with 64 being held within statutory timescales (81%).

Review Health Assessments (RHA) are undertaken by Looked After Children Nurse who works for the Central London Community Health Care Trust but is collocated in Merton's Civic Centre with the social work teams. 118 RHA were undertaken during the year with 95.7% in timescales. This is above the national average of 82%.

Immunisations: Merton had 94 children who were in care for at least 12 months. Of these children 94% had their immunisations up-to-date and 91% had their teeth checked by a dentist. This was higher than the overall London figures of 80% and 84% respectively as well as the National figures of 88% and 86%. It was also a significant improvement from Merton's 2018/2019 performance of 80% immunisations and 84% dental checks.

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQ) are sent out to all children, carers and schools for children between the ages of 5-16 years old. SDQ are tools used to assess and monitor children's emotional well-being. Disappointingly, we achieved a 70% return in the 2019/2020 reporting year which was down from 93% the previous year. The percentage of returns across London and nationally was 80% and 81% respectively.

## *Emotional Well-Being Pilot Project*

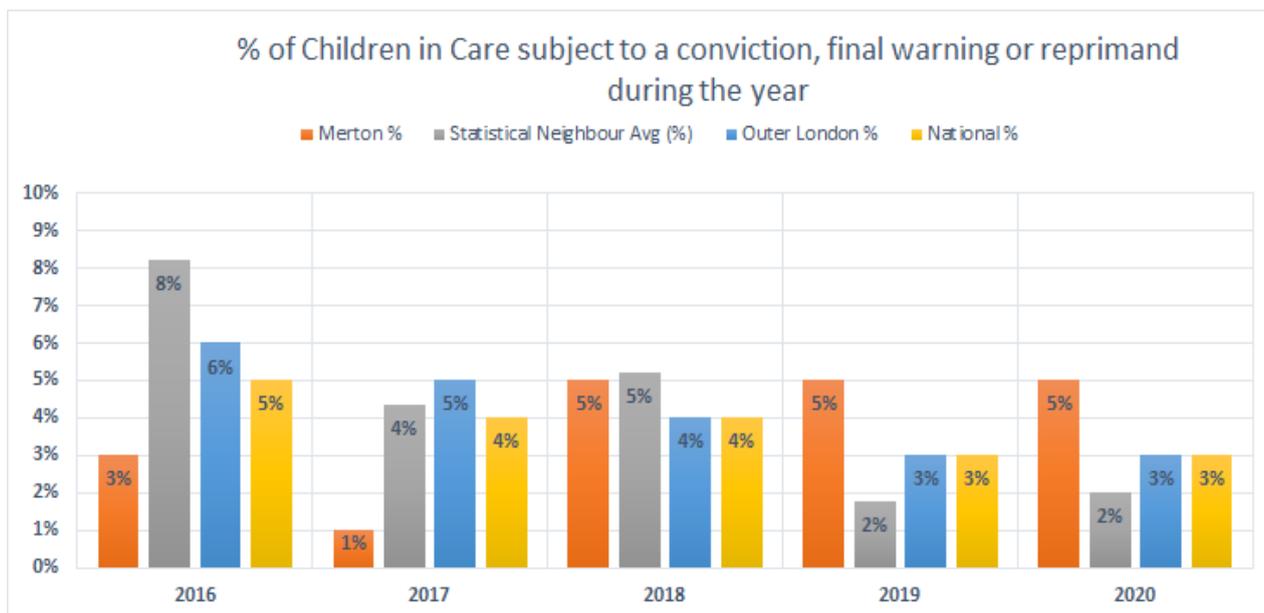
Alongside 8 other local authorities around England, Merton were successful in a bid to take part in a pilot funded by the DFE and facilitated by a consortium led by the Anna Freud Centre. The project looked to assess the mental health needs of children at the earliest possible stage upon entering care through a series of questionnaires and consultation between a *Virtual Mental Health Lead* and the child's social worker. The project promoted a *mentalisation* approach and looked to produce a "*passport*" document for the child or young person. The project formerly started in August 2019. Early findings were that Merton already had a good service where social workers were in the habit of consulting with our in-house CAMHS team. Unfortunately, with the first national Covid-19 lockdown occurring in late March, the project will run its course over a quite different context than that originally envisaged.

### **VII. Section 5: Offending**

As of 31st March 2020, Merton continues to have a small number of young people in care for more than 12 months involved with the Youth Justice system which is reflected in the charts below. A key success in outcomes for these four children is that none of them have re-offended during the past 12 months.

One child is now 18 years old and has transitioned to the care leaver's service with an up-to-date pathway plan. Two of the children will be 18 years old this year and both also have an up-to-date pathway plan that reflects the joint work with the youth justice system.

Care and pathway plans include support to prevent re-offending behaviour. The IRO will ensure that care and pathway plan adequately address aspects of a child's needs. They will raise a challenge if a child who is looked after and involved with the youth justice system has needs that are not being adequately assessed. All four children are of black, Asian or minority ethnicity. Due to concerns regarding racial disproportionality of children in the Youth Justice Service, new actions have been included in Merton's Youth Justice Plan to address this.



**Offending by children who have been looked after continuously for at least 12 months as of 31st March**

	No. of Children in Care for at least 12 months aged 10 or older as of 31 March	No. and % convicted or subject to a final warning or reprimand during the year	
<b>2016</b>	75	2	3.0%
<b>2017</b>	75	1	1.0%
<b>2018</b>	74	4	5.4%
<b>2019</b>	81	4	4.9%
<b>2020</b>	76	4	5.3%
<b>London 2020</b>	5,230	180	3.0%
<b>National 2020</b>	39,620	1,160	3.0%

## VIII. Section 6: Education

Merton has a dedicated virtual school who work closely alongside schools, carers and social work teams. The Virtual School produced an annual report for the 2018/2019 academic year with the following highlights.

Merton's percentage of children in care with Special Educational Needs or Disability, 62%, continues to be higher than the 56.3% national figure. All Key Stage 1 children are reported to have made their expected progress in Early Years Foundation Stages scores in reading, writing and mathematics.

12.5% of our children in Key Stage 4, achieved a strong English & maths pass, compared to 10% for children in care nationally. 59 of our young people aged 16 and 17 have pursued and were successful in a range of courses, from Entry Level to Level 3, suitable to their needs and ambitions. Of those not in education or training, extensive efforts are made to keep in touch with the young people and support them into appropriate provision. In higher education, 24 care experienced young people studied for degrees, with six graduating at the end of the academic year. No Merton child in care was permanently excluded during 2018 -2019, continuing a long trend and the percentage of children receiving fixed period exclusions

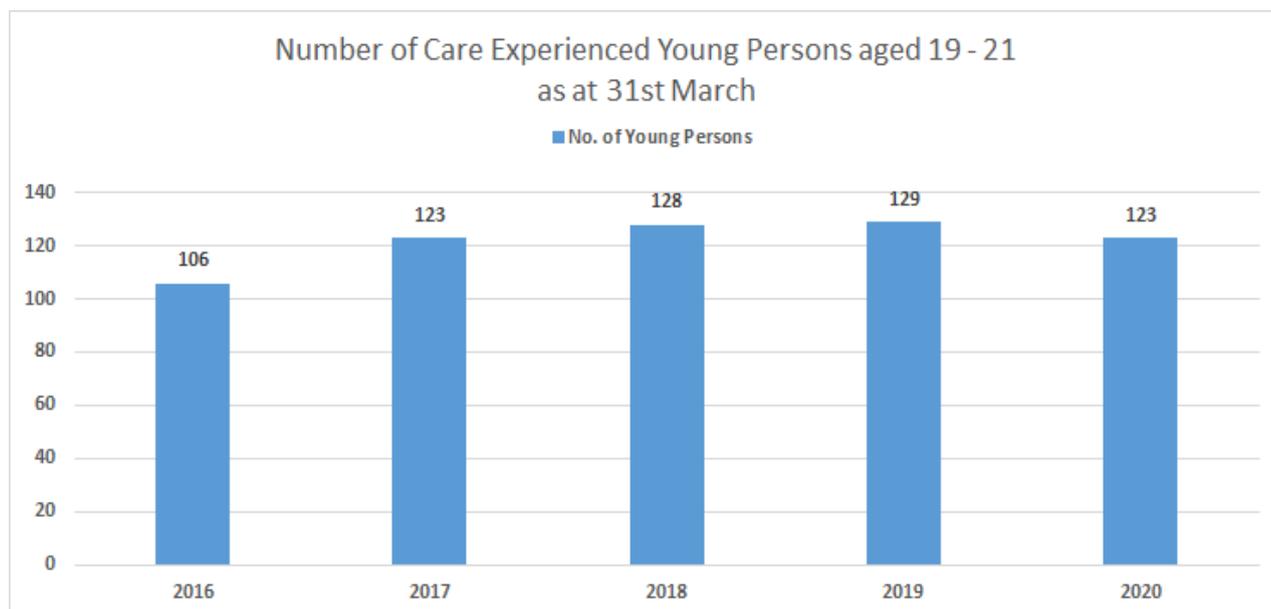
reduced significantly, and is well below national figures. There was also a significant reduction in the total number of school sessions missed: 75 in 2018-19 compared to 120 in 2017-2018.

## IX. Section 7: Care Experienced Young People aged 19-21 years

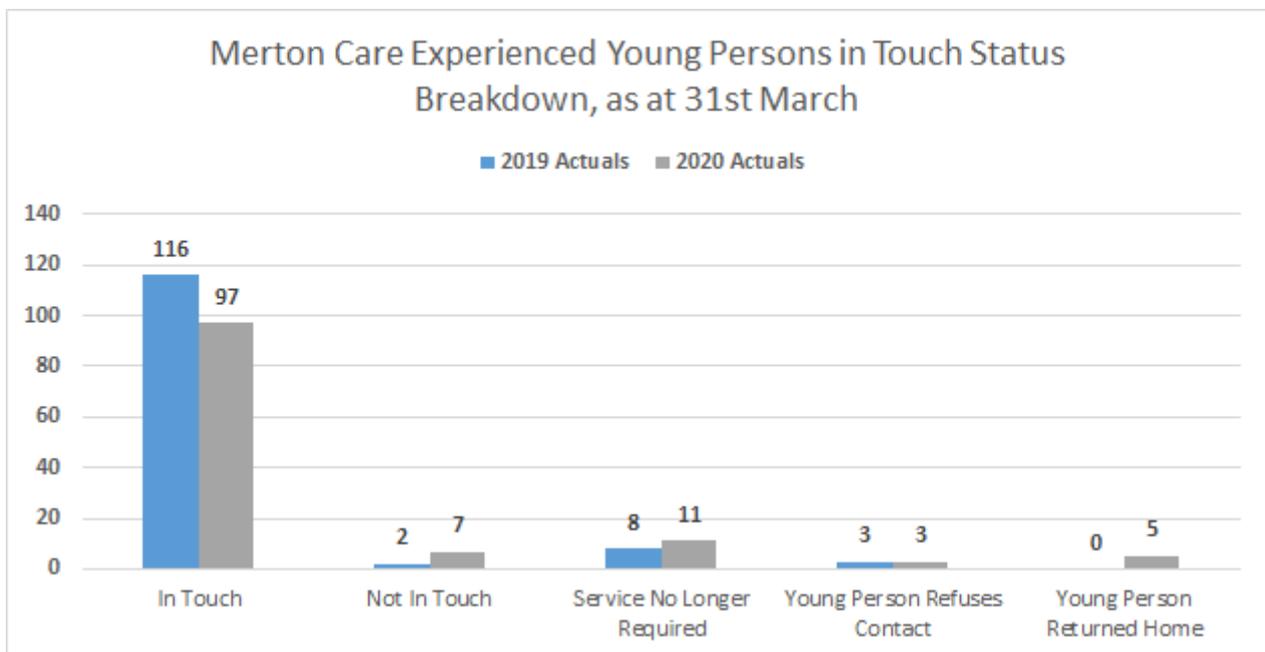
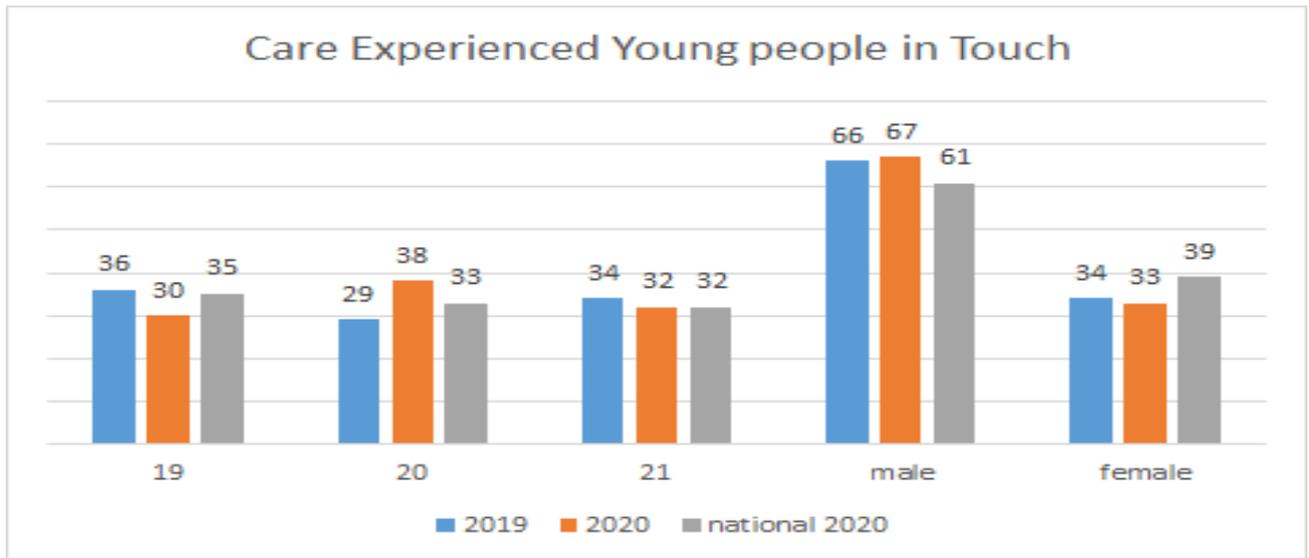
### ***Care Experienced Young People in Touch***

Children’s Social Care has a range of duties and powers to provide after care advice and assistance to eligible care experienced young people, and to those who have been accommodated by other specified agencies. Good corporate parents will provide young people with help and support to access education, employment and training opportunities and to find accommodation suitable to meet their needs. Although the law extended duties to care experienced young people until 25 years, the DfE national benchmarking data only reports on those young adults aged 18,19, 20 and 21 years.

On 31 March 2020, Merton had 123 care experienced young people across these age groups, a decrease of 6 from the previous reporting year. As previously mentioned within this annual report, although the number of children in our care has remained stable, the demographics indicate that the largest group of children entering our care are older children. As a result, we would expect to see a small increase in the numbers of care experienced young adults.



Merton’s ‘In Touch’ performance, as set out in the chart below, is consistent with the national data and shows only minor fluctuations with the previous reporting years.

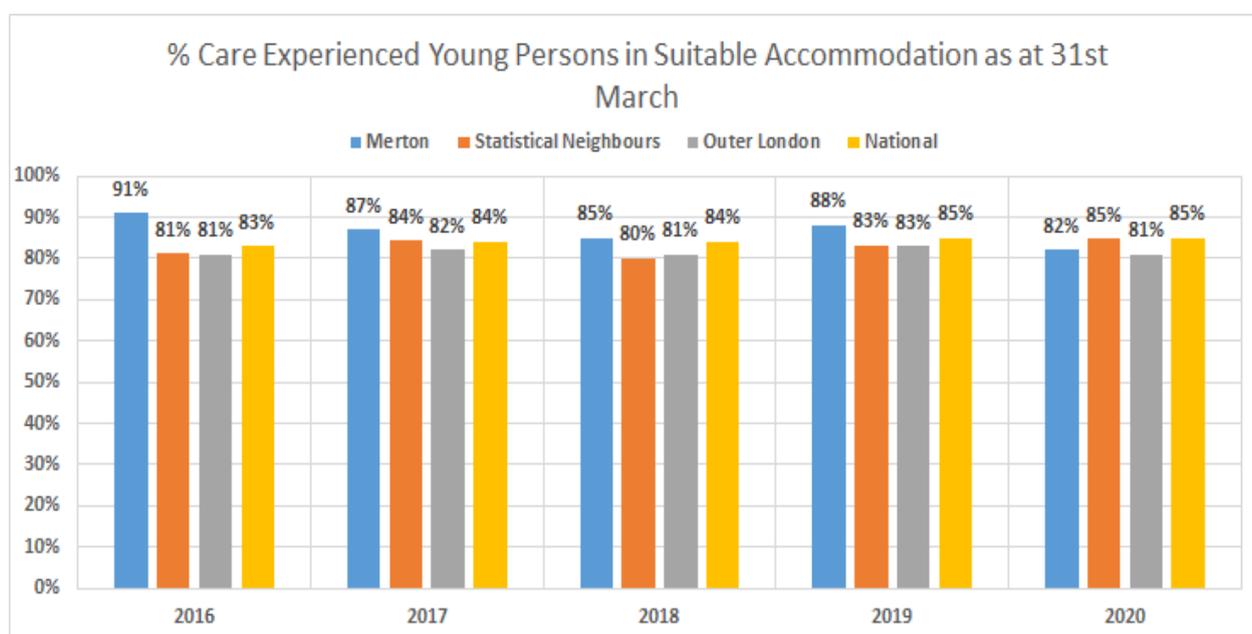


In 2019/20 there was an increase of young people where the service was no longer required, or they declined contact. Compared to 2019, there was an increase for young people returned home in 2020, the number of young people who refused contact remained the same as in 2019. In this reporting period 2019/20, we explored and continue to develop peer networks with the young people or identifying with them someone they might consider as an advocate or person of trust. For some young adults within this group, they may have chosen to have contact when they need or require it. As young adults, they may choose to have less formal contact with us, but approach other peers, professionals or family members. As corporate parents, we would act as all other parents might such as being curious but respectful, supportive but available when needed and promoting self-sufficiency and independence. For all our care experienced young people, we explored different ways to communicate and keep in touch. For example, we strengthened using text messages if we were unable to visit or have telephone conversations.

For Merton young people with care experience, we have strengthened access to support and advice available. For example, alongside Education professionals, we have strengthened and increased opportunities for young people to attend college, planned and assessed education needs and additional support where required both in terms of learning, but also in respect of language. In relation to housing, we worked collaboratively with housing to identify local housing and promote our young people to have increased access or priority, planning for transition. In 2020, we have set out a housing protocol that will increase the offer of local housing and good accommodation for our young people. Working within the community and alongside health and the participation lead, whilst we have increased opportunities for young people to have contact with each other, access to advice, formal support and promote independence skills when offering group sessions such as cooking and finance. We have equally strengthened the voice of young people to have a say in the services they want us to deliver when updating our local offer and the annual letter to all care leavers. We are aware that Covid-19 will impact on the way we remain in contact and are alert to the isolation some young people may experience. Both pre and within the Covid 19 period, we needed to be creative when ensuing communication takes place, but equally ensure the rights and choice of the young person/ adult is respected.

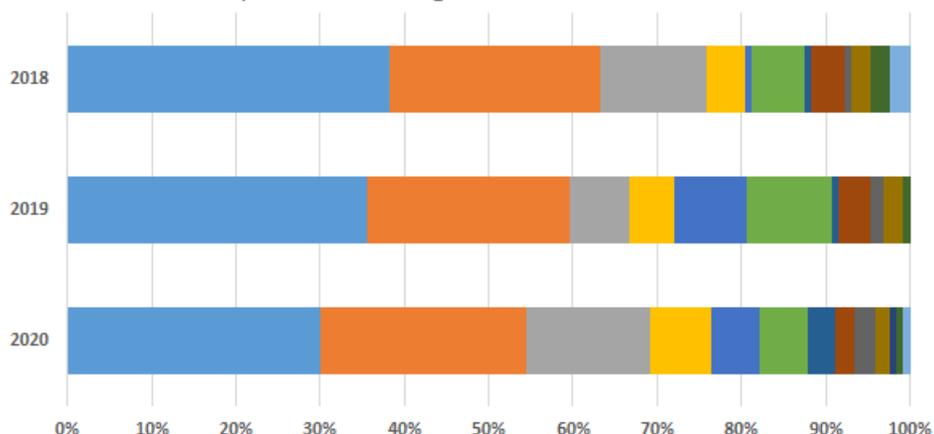
### *Care Experienced Young People's accommodation*

The legal framework for care experienced young people aims to make sure that they receive the right support and services in their transition to adulthood, including access to accommodation. The legislation most relevant to care leavers' accommodation needs is the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, which imposes accommodation duties on local authorities to support certain categories of looked-after children and care leavers.



The chart above reflects care experienced young persons in suitable accommodation, as of 31st March, as a percentage of all care experienced young persons at that time (including those not in touch, those who refused services and those no longer requiring a service)

Type of Accommodation for Care Experienced Young Persons as at 31st March



	2020	2019	2018
■ Semi-independent	30.1%	35.7%	38.3%
■ Independent living	24.4%	24.0%	25.0%
■ Not in touch	14.6%	7.0%	12.5%
■ Community home or other form of residential care such as a National Health Service (NHS) establishment	7.3%	5.4%	4.7%
■ With former foster carer(s)	5.7%	8.5%	0.8%
■ With parent(s) or relative(s)	5.7%	10.1%	6.3%
■ Supported lodgings	3.3%	0.8%	0.8%
■ In custody	2.4%	3.9%	3.9%
■ No fixed abode/homeless	2.4%	1.6%	0.8%
■ Other accommodation	1.6%	2.3%	2.3%
■ Emergency accommodation (like a night shelter, direct access or emergency hostel)	0.8%	0.0%	0.0%
■ Residence not known	0.8%	0.8%	2.3%
■ Ordinary lodgings, without formal support	0.8%	0.0%	2.3%

Accommodation is regarded as suitable if it provides safe, secure and affordable provision for young people. The definition of suitable accommodation can be broadened to include those young people which may be detained or sentenced to young Offenders establishments, which is not deemed suitable. In addition, it may also relate to accommodation that is considered by Merton as not an approved provider or unregulated, no fixed abode, and some accommodation with parent/carer. Within this reporting year,

In 19/20 there was a slight decrease of 6% in care experienced young people accessing suitable accommodation. We are in the process of reviewing this area of practice to ensure we are always able to support young people into suitable accommodation. Early indicators suggest that there was increased use of supported accommodation and a decrease in the use of semi-independent provision. For some of our young people, the recording of unsuitable accommodation may have applied in terms of accommodation that was not regulated or where they were placed in detention. Whilst there was an increase on the use of supported lodgings, ordinary lodgings without formal support and community home or other form of residential care, there was also an increase in young people having no fixed abode, the use of emergency accommodation. Whilst in this reporting period, housing and Children’s Social Care managers continued meeting to review housing needs for care experienced young people, further investigation is

needed in 2020 to examine why some of our young people had no fixed abode or required emergency accommodation, but equally strengthen the use of semi-independent provision or through Merton nominated housing scheme.

### **Care Leavers in Education, Employment or Training**

A good standard of education is a key driver towards achieving positive employment outcomes in adulthood. Whilst the reporting figure from 2020 has decreased, it is important to note the SD903 indicators for NEET & EET changed so may not reflect all the young people within the Care Leaver cohort. As with the previous reporting year, the NEET population has a higher cohort of males at 64%, and is predominately white British 44%.

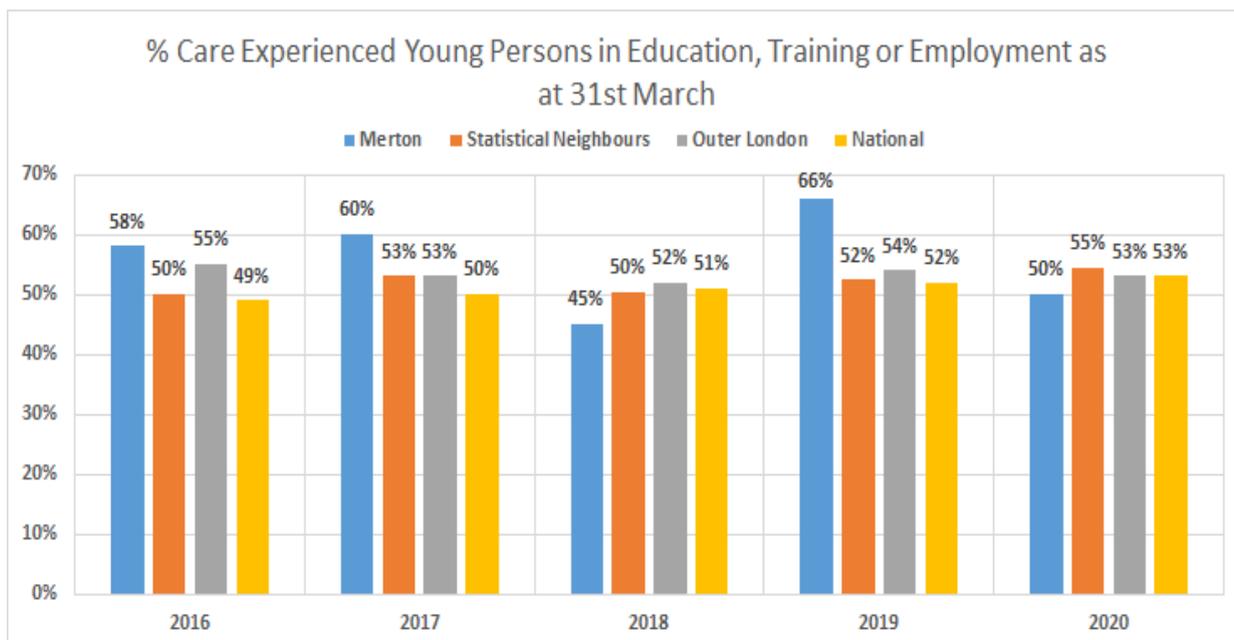
Whilst the overall population of young people Looked After within Merton has generally remained the same over the last two years, Merton has seen an increase for those young people reaching 18 years and seeking care leavers support. One positive aspect from the reporting between 2019/20 was the decrease of young people who are young parents of 4.5% and those with Special educational needs of 4%.

Care Experienced Persons Activity, as at 31st March 2020 (Aged 19-21)	Aged 19		Aged 20		Aged 21	
	Merton	National	Merton	National	Merton	National
In higher education i.e. studies beyond A level	0%	5%	9%	6%	10%	7%
In education other than higher education	35%	29%	30%	19%	13%	12%
In training or employment	11%	24%	13%	27%	23%	28%
Not in education, training or employment	38%	37%	40%	39%	33%	40%
Information not known	16%	6%	9%	9%	21%	12%

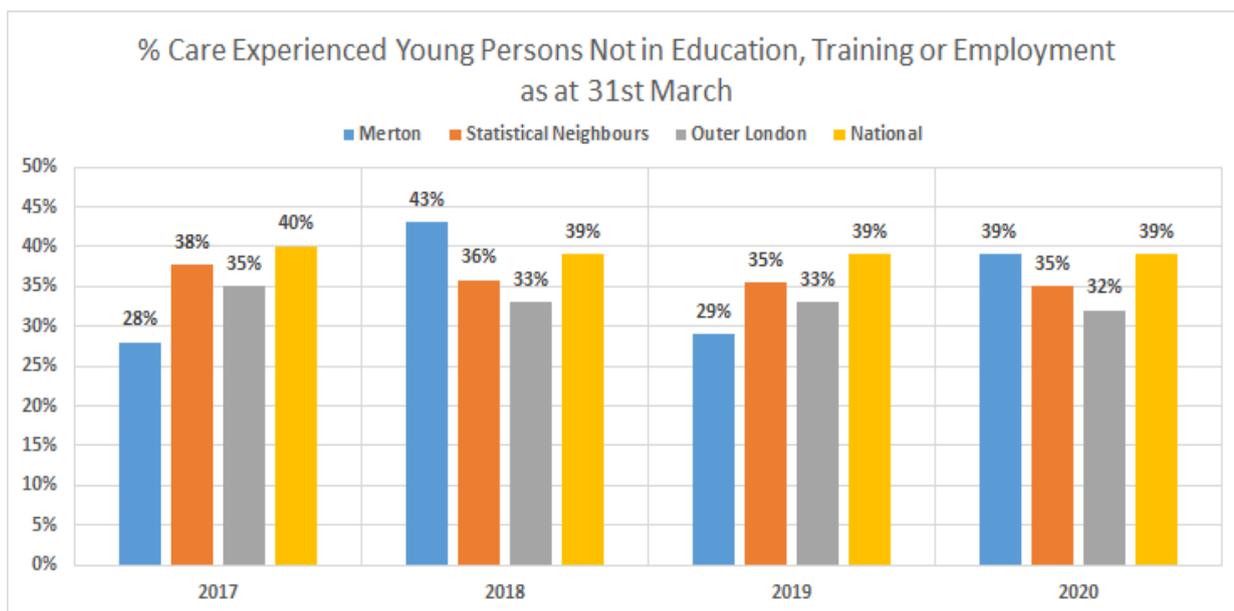
In recent years, Merton’s NEET figures are comparable to national benchmarks. Both within this reporting period and currently, we continue to support care experienced young people to achieve the best outcomes within education, employment, and training (EET) through monthly NEET panel meetings (consists of multi-agency professionals and allocated workers). Within the discussions, the allocated worker is provided with direct information for local education provisions, employment agencies, other projects and advice.

Working collaboratively with My Futures access to suitable education providers and employment agencies who are eager to provide opportunities for care experienced young people is explored.

In the most recent reporting year, the proportion of young people engaged in education, training and employment declined from 66% to 50% and is now lower than national and London averages. Part of the explanation is the early impact of Covid (as data is drawn from 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020 – and during the lockdown) as well as the relatively small numbers (which means small variations have a disproportionate impact on performance figures). Merton’s care experienced population is engaged in education for longer when compared to national averages. In the reporting period, a larger proportion of care experienced young people aged 20 and 21 were accessing higher education. We also say a higher proportion of 19 and 20 year olds accessing education other than higher education.



This chart shows, care experienced young persons in Education, Training or Employment, as of 31<sup>st</sup> March, as a percentage of all care experienced young persons at that time (including those not in touch, those who refused services and those no longer requiring a service)



This chart shows, care experienced young people Not in Education, Training or Employment, as of 31<sup>st</sup> March, as a percentage of all care experienced young persons at that time (including those not in touch, those who refused services and those no longer requiring a service) Information not known includes those not in touch

### ***Missing and Child Exploitation***

Both the Multiagency Risk, Vulnerability and Exploitation (MARVE) and Missing panel meetings continued to take place, both have a cross range of multiagency attendance and active participation. Development of contextual safeguarding practice and approaches supported by the pilot project with the University of Bedfordshire have been embedded, additional training and support in the community partnerships has been rolled out. In 2020, we established contextual harm champions that are linked to schools, but also provided a forum

where professionals and partners could discuss concerns they have for young people and assess the risk appropriately. Both MARVE and Missing forums strengthen awareness and understanding of risk for young people when considering contextual harm aspects and the links within missing events, exposure to child sexual or criminal exploitation. When reviewing support or targeted interventions for young people at both forums and confirmed as a collaborative group the targeted interventions required.

Young people presented at both panels are children Looked After, Child protection, Child in Need or open to services. This includes young people placed in Merton by other Local Authorities as Children Looked After. Reporting in this area has not been able to break down the actual number which are Merton Children and those considered as Children Looked After. Reviewing information, the majority of young people reported missing from home were male (59%); 93% of CSE concerns were for females. The main age for young people who were missing and at risk of CSE was 15 to 16 years, the ethnicity remains was predominately white British (missing 49% and 32% BAME communities) with 64% white British and 36% from BAME communities regarding CSE.

### Missing from Home

Quarter	Notifications received	RHI/RIF	RHI within 72 Hours	MFH Advice Information	Number of MFH 1:1 Interventions	Young people enabled to access other sources of support
<b>2019-2020</b>						
Q1	76	56	30	35	14	3
Q2	74	39	27	20	12	4
Q3	108	67	32	39	16	14
Q4	114	76	44	39	11	10
	372	238	133	133	53	31

Information above and chart below is taken from the annual Catch 22 report. When young people were contacted to discuss the most recent missing event (return home interview completed by Catch 22), the majority stated a strong pull factor was socialisation with peer groups that are centred on an overriding sense of 'belonging'. Push factors cited included boredom. One emerging trend was young people leaving home to visit a parent after divorce or separation, some events recorded as missing was short term absence of a few hours. In 2019/20, the number of repeat notifications increased but was linked to three young people who accounted for 108 missing episodes. For some young people when contacted to discuss risk and missing events, a high number declined to discuss or share information

Within the current reporting period, young people discussed factors such as emotional well-being and mental health, this is particularly relevant for those young people who had repeat missing notifications. Factors such as trauma, attachment, diagnosed and undiagnosed clinical mental health and developmental issues also impacted on young people's understanding of risk and risky situations. Over this reporting period the Missing from Home service received 372 notifications of which 238 young people had Return Home Interviews (RHI) completed (64%) The notifications related to 175 individuals and of these 131 received

just 1 RHI. 7 individuals accounted for 158 of the total missing notifications received, 4 of these young people were in care. 71% of RHI's were completed within 72 hours, an increase of 8% from the previous year. Targeted support and intervention for this group could be bespoke services on a 1-1 basis from either TExT (tackling exploitation team) or Catch 22. Whilst specific to the young person, it could include aspects such as counselling from partners such as Education, CAMHs or through planned work within drug and alcohol services. For all young people within this group, there will be an allocated social worker or professional who will lead and co-ordinate the plans.

### Child Sexual Exploitation

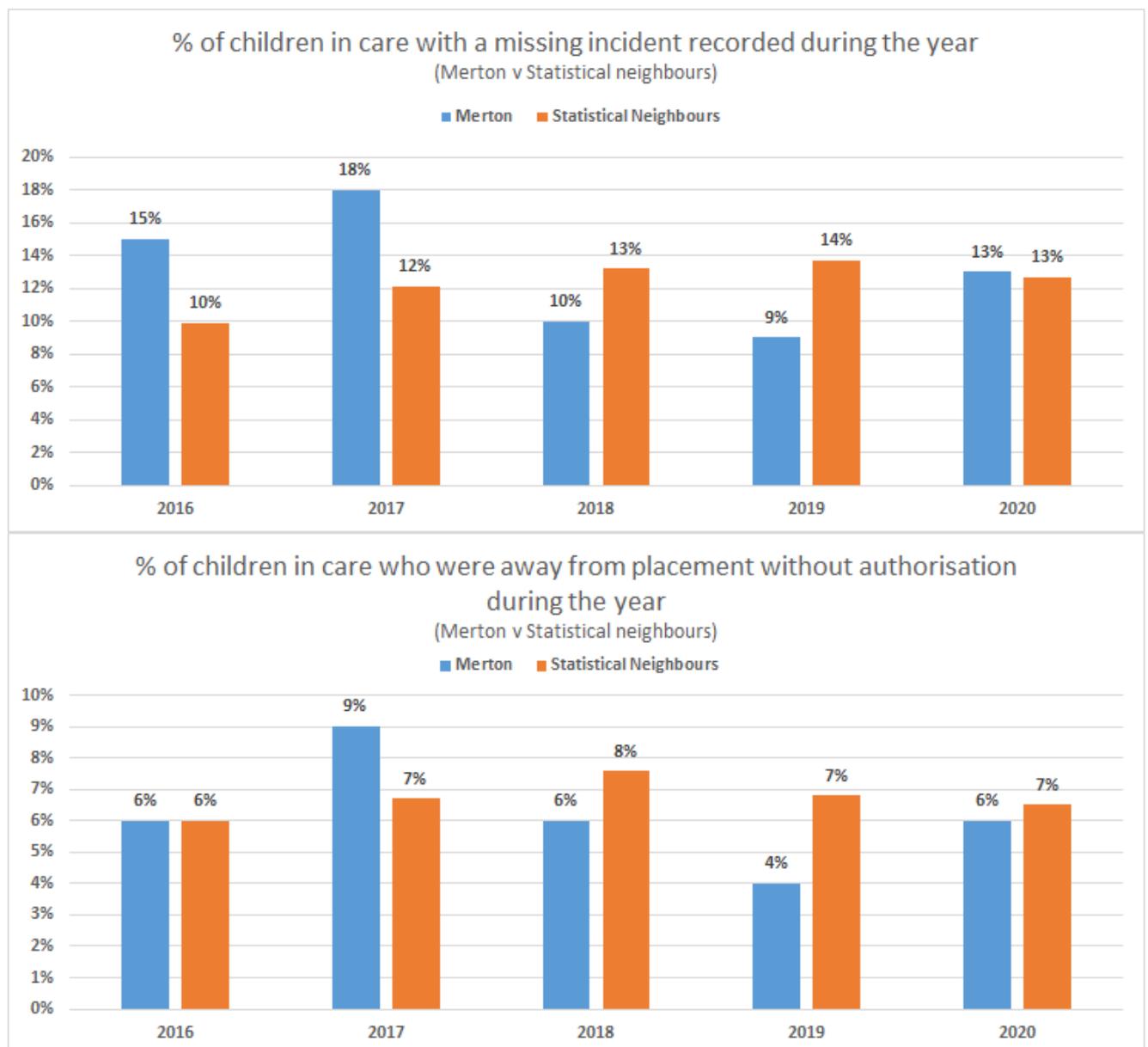
Quarter	CYP brought forward on an intervention	Number of New Referrals	New Referrals engaging in Intervention	New Referrals not engaging	Number of YP engaging that are LAC, CP or CIN	Young people enabled to access other sources of support
<b>2019-2020</b>						
Q1	10	4	2	0	12	8
Q2	5	9	9	2	5	9
Q3	9	4	4	0	4	9
Q4	9	3	3	0	9	5
	33	20	18	2	30	31

When reviewing the performance and trends within this reporting period, the link between Missing events and child exploitation can be tightly integrated. Often risk for young people has not fallen neatly within one category of CSE or CCE and there is an overlap across themes. For example, whilst 57.1% of the CSE cases had at least one missing from home episode, the factors behind these events might be linked to different push/ pull factors, peer relationships or from life or family experiences.

During this reported year, themes emerged such as young people engaging in alcohol or substance use with older males, underage sex, being vulnerable and lack of understanding the process of grooming. As with other Local Authorities, Merton observed an increase within online grooming through increased use of personal mobile phones and linked to social media sites such as snap chat and Instagram. For example, whilst young people may share explicit images, they might not be aware when they were forwarded to others. Additionally, young people 'linking' or accepting requests from unknown people online might not be aware of the risks these people could pose to them.

As part of our support for Merton young people, we offered brief alcohol and sexual health interventions alongside direct work. Additional support was provided such as emotional wellbeing and targeted education. For three young people considered at high risk of CSE, it resulted with referrals into MARVE for a specialist CSE intervention. Feedback from young people who have used and access the service said 'I think the most important thing is for me to have someone I can talk to and trust, my worker definitely helps me in feeling safe and listens to me and gives me advice. I feel I can talk about anything', "I enjoyed the sessions and learnt new information and would use this to keep myself safe, sharing my experiences I felt like a boss"

In review of the chart below, reporting and tracking of young people has increased, the embedding and review of incidents take place at the weekly missing panel. Whilst our current case management system presents challenges in terms of recording the missing event and return home interview, there has been improved recording, analysis and oversight from managers and practitioners when reviewing peer links, locations of interests and planning disruptions to new events. In 2020/21, further exploration will take place to ensure practitioners are recording the difference between absence and missing for young people, assessing risk clearly setting out the contextual harm factors as well as reflecting the young person's voice. When return home interviews are completed, early identification and emerging themes of risk are set out, interventions planned as a professional group around the young person and family. These are strength-based and engage all the key members. For those hard-to-reach young people who don't always engage, we strengthen the strategies in place now to engage them more actively.



## **Catch22 Risk and Resilience, Missing and CSE service**

Merton continues to commission from Catch22 an integrated Risk and Resilience Service incorporating substance misuse prevention, sexual health and detached youth provision: this is separate to missing and CSE as reported above. The service provides support and interventions for young people aged 24 and under who are living, are educated or spend social time in Merton. In 2019/20, 280 young people accessed the outreach provision for several different provisions as set out below. The chart below is taken from their annual report and reflects young people that may be supported under CIN, child protection and Children Looked After. As mentioned previously, Merton is not yet able to report on those Merton young people which are Looked After.

Quarter	YP accessed via detached outreach intervention	YP accessing diversionary projects (3 or more times)	targeted intervention
Q1	88	21	4
Q2	73	66	17
Q3	41	33	15
Q4	78	41	22
	280	161	58

In relation to trends across the reporting year, there were lower levels of young people 'hanging out' visibly within estates and/or town centre (the exception being November). As a response, services were revised and targeted such as changing times and locations for young people to access support and services after school. In place of larger groups, support and intervention was targeted to support young people more intensively with smaller groups over a period such as Moreton Green and try to initiate diversionary projects over the summer such as the Music Klub and the gym project; to address anti-social behaviour, low level substance misuse and boredom. However, for a small number of young people and when contacted, they declined support or advice, refusing to provide any personal details and/or being reluctant to provide anything more than a first name to detached staff feeling that this will be passed to the police. Therefore, for some young people it has taken longer to build trust or if there was an activity where parental consent is required, we did not have their contact details.

There was a decrease in numbers of young people referred from court into the Youth Justice Service which has resulted in schools remaining the primary source of referrals for specialist substance misuse interventions. However, we have seen a rise in requests for targeted interventions linked to behavioural or emotional health aspects. Additionally, services or support around different age groups reflect different themes. For example, in relation to young people aged 18-24 years, these services have focused on substance misuse, health and alcohol. This has led to increase collaborative working with other agencies such as health and GP's. Whilst Mental health remained high over this year resulting in several referrals to adult mental health services via GP's, some of the common themes are linked to levels of suicidal ideation and self-harming that required additional reporting. For Merton young people and considering detached service support, we have focused on the links between; diet, alcohol, nutrition and keeping fit promoting walking in the green spaces across the borough and joining

the gym sessions to improve both mental well-being and fitness.

### *Specialist Substance Misuse Element*

The services provided for Merton young people remains underpinned by the well-being model and the principles of multi-agency working. Several joint working protocols were refreshed as part of supporting the improvement of referral pathways and information sharing to ensure the needs of young people are at the centre of all work undertaken. Whilst partnership working with Child and Adult Mental Health Services, Social Care, Youth Justice service and voluntary agencies signpost and strengthen support services for young people requiring support or advice, this was underpinned by young people participating and creating their own support packages with partners beyond engagement with the service where required. As part of the multi-agency and partnership group, Catch22 attended several strategic groups to ensure the most complex young people that are identified at risk and/or using substances are referred and have a smooth transition into the service. Information sharing/updates are in place for clients in treatment and/or referrals via; MARVE Panel, Multi-Agency Child Exploitation Panels/Strategy Meetings and Youth Justice service. In relation to the young people who access services, it is predominately male, aged 16 to 20 years and predominately white British. In reviewing the annual report from Catch 22, the largest demand for services surrounds the sexual health and C Card scheme, closely followed from detached youth interventions. The main referral to the catch 22 originated from universal services.

Feedback from some of the young people who accessed support was

*“My Catch22 worker really listened to me and supported me in stopping my cannabis use, when I messed up, they were understanding and helped me to stop again.”*

*“I learnt so much from working with my worker they helped me understand the harms to my liver, I did not know what a unit was until I worked with Catch22 and the harms of binge drinking.”*

*“My support worker always listened to me and did not judge me and always responded to my text messages, her advice was always good and easy to understand.”*

*“As a result of working with Catch22 I passed my GCSE’s and now work at Merton Civic Centre a big thank you in helping me turn my life around!”*

*“My worker was always friendly and understanding, I felt like I wasn’t be judged so it made me free to speak. I think the most important thing was for me to have someone I could talk to and trust. I definitely felt safe talking to my worker.”*

There are several successes from 2019/20, these were reduced substance use, increased knowledge of the harms and effects of substances, support to access self helps groups as part of remaining drug free and supporting young people to access secure employment, housing provision. For young people, we have observed an increased confidence and sense of purpose. And confidence to join in detached activities and diversionary programmes like the gym and music sessions.

### *Children subject to Trafficking- Service: Love 146*

Love 146 is an international human rights organisation working to end child trafficking and exploitation through survivor care and prevention. When a high risk trafficked, and unaccompanied young person is identified, alongside the social worker Love 146 will work on

a 1-1 basis with the young person. In this reporting year, there are three examples provided for this report where this approach and support made a direct difference for our young people. For one young person, we provided planned support for housing, health and reducing the risk of exploitation, this increase stability and reduced risks identified previously. For a second young person, 1-1 support was provided for safety planning, therapeutic support and wraparound support (with education, health, immigration status etc). The outcome achieved was when the young person transferred to a Personal Advisor, they achieved several personal goals and aspirations they wanted, they discussed feeling supported and safe. For the third young person, planned outreach work occurred with a young person who was vulnerable, had complex mental health needs and previously attempted self-harm. They supported the young person to develop healthy relationships and working with both the young person and mental health professionals to support their needs, strengthen the transition planning towards adulthood.

### *Participation and Children in Care Council (CICC)*

In 2018, Merton entered a pilot to outsource the participation service to Jigsaw4u. Upon reviewing this pilot it was mutually agreed to bring the service back in house to be a part of Merton's overarching Participation and Engagement Services under the Educational Division of Children Schools and Families. This transition back occurred in July 2019. Most young people involved in the Jigsaw4u service stopped participating when the service transferred. Some young people have told us that they did not feel involved or consulted about this change.

The participation strategy is to create a variety of engagement activities/forums for children and young people to become involved in. Children and young people can be nominated by their social worker, personal advisor or foster carer and then hold a 3-way introductory meeting with the participation service. Through engagement in these activities, trusting relationships will grow between the participation service and the young people engaging with them and they will use this as a platform to undertake consultation and or provide feedback on service delivery. Through these participation events, it is hoped that children and young people will go onto become involved in one of the Children in Care Councils; one for care experienced young people and one for children in care.

In order to boost engagement with the participation service, a residential event was organised for the spring of 2020. The event was well subscribed to with significant numbers due to attend; however, this was unfortunately cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. As a reflection of the importance of establishing a robust Children in Care Council, participation is now a standing agenda item at every corporate parenting board for which care experienced young people have started to attend.

Merton have been running monthly sessions in the community for unaccompanied asylum seeking children where food and drinks were provided. The sessions alternated between social events and workshops facilitated by different organisations with topics such as: Housing, understanding financial entitlements, alcohol and drugs, sexual health, managing stress and anxiety, budgeting and cooking skills. Some social events included: board games, movie nights, cinema, Wimbledon Youth theatre, Surrey Oval Cricket, sightseeing trip to London and participation in a London Refugee football tournament. Following a tradition of residential summer trips each summer, members of the 14+ team accompanied young people on a trip to the Youth Hostel Association in the South Downs, East Sussex. Activities included kayaking, abseiling, canoeing, climbing, coasteering, and mountain walks. Sadly, these events came to

an end with the societal restrictions brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic.

### *Voice of the Child in Care*

The last survey for our children in care was undertaken by Bright Spots in 2018 and has continued to inform our current planning and strategies. There are many ways that the child's voice is incorporated into their own planning including: direct work tools, their IRO consulting them prior to reviews and midway reviews, feedback on their foster homes as part of foster carer reviews, and through advocacy and independent visitors which is covered in the below section. Whilst this is positive, we need to think about how we could capture children's views digitally which would add the possible value of collating the views of many young people to provide themes to help direct service improvement.

### ***Advocacy and Independent Visiting***

*"The advocate spoke with me, listened to what I had to say and helped me get my views across to the social worker at the meeting, I really feel as if I was listened to as I am now allowed to live with my Mum and Dad" - from a young person <sup>7</sup>*

Jigsaw4u have been providing advocacy and independent visiting since 2013. The current contract commenced in April 2017 for an initial period of 3-years before being extended till March 2022.

A Jigsaw4u advocate attended 26 Child in Care Reviews from 34 referrals. This was a decrease of 10 from 2018/2019 with a target is 45. The Jigsaw4u annual report hypothesis that the decrease could be due to young people turning 18 who had been making beneficial use of the service. It could also reflect the churn of social workers and team managers in the Child in Care Team during the 2019/2020 reporting period. With the stability now achieved in management and staffing of the Children in Care service we are optimistic about seeing an increase in referrals during the next reporting year.

As of 31/03/2020, Jigsaw4u were providing 12 young people with independent visitors; 2 of whom are now care experienced young people over the age of 18. 5-young people were in a waiting list with 3 new volunteers being prepared to be matched to a young person. Encouragingly, many of the independent visitors have been matched with their respective young person for over 2 years enabling a trusting relationship to develop.

The service advocated for 18 children from 21 referrals across social care around complaints. Positively, this was able the target of 12. The Jigsaw4u practitioner engages the child and SW team early to resolve the issue as timely as possible. Some of this service has involved obtaining views on placements, problems in a foster home, obtaining food and assistance for a care experienced young person. Our social work teams care passionately about our children but working in the caring industry can be draining; having a robust advocacy service helps us to remain child focused and ensure that we are always providing the best possible service through providing us with an objective view.

## **X. Conclusion**

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<sup>7</sup> Jigsaw4u Merton Annual report - Advocacy, Independent Visiting project. April 1st 2019 – March 31st 2020

The 2019/2020 reporting year experienced a lot of transition for the teams in Children's Social Care working with children in care. However, in Merton, there is a strong corporate parenting ethos with good partnership working between health, education and other colleagues which ensured children and young people still experienced a good service. With the service finding stability of management and staff towards the end of the reporting year we will be in a strong position to see our children and young people through what looks to be an incredibly challenging year ahead with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.