



London Borough of Merton Corporate Parenting Annual Report 2021/2022

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I. Executive Summary

This report covers the reporting year April 2021 to March 2022 which follows an unprecedented period in living memory, with Covid-19, lockdowns, and the many challenges those brought. Children in care and care experienced young people are some of the most vulnerable and marginalised people in society. Such challenges and pressures on societies tend to have the biggest impact on our most vulnerable and push them further towards the fringes. It is our duty as corporate parents to minimise this impact and shield our corporate children and young people as much as possible, just as we would with children within our own family networks.

This report is an overview of Merton's Children's Services' performance in meeting the needs of our children in care and care experienced young people.

Highlights from the report are outlined below:

- Despite the ongoing challenges around Covid-19, in this year, Merton's services for children looked after and care experienced young people was found to be 'Outstanding' by Ofsted in February 2022. Ofsted said of our services supporting children in care that 'teams of highly committed, ambitious and determined professionals work extremely well together to help children to remain safe and achieve in life.'
- During this year, there was also a restructure across Children's Social Care and turnover in leadership with three Assistant Directors. Despite this, the newly formed Corporate Parenting Service, which united most corporate parenting operational functions into the one service, maintained strong succession planning with the internal promotions of our new permanent CEO, the Director of Children Services, and Assistant Director of Education. The commitment and high aspirations of senior managers and political leaders in Merton was also recognised by Ofsted.
- The overall number of children in care decreased again, a pattern which was mirrored across other cohorts of children and contributable to Merton's practice model. However, we expect these numbers to stabilise moving forward due to consistency in the numbers of children entering care.
- There was an increase in the average duration of court proceedings which was attributable to the back log experienced by the courts following the Covid-19 lockdowns.
- The first constellation of the Mockingbird Family Model of Fostering was launched. It was a disappointing year for the recruitment of foster carers which was anecdotally experienced across other boroughs. However, recruitment of foster carers is expected to be stronger next year.
- The percentage of children in care achieving the standard in Key Stage 2 for reading, writing and mathematics is well above the national and regional average.
- 16 care experienced young people attended university during the year with one achieving a master's degree.
- Timeliness of Initial Health Assessments continues to be an issue which we are working with health colleagues to address. However, Merton's performance in the number of children was up-to-date review health assessments, dental checks, and strengths and difficulties questionnaire was good in comparison with other national and London Local Authorities.
- Merton remains good at *keeping in touch* with our care experienced young people and ensuring that they are in appropriate accommodation. Our Corporate Parenting commitment is evidenced through the high numbers of care leavers remaining with their former foster carers and *staying put* arrangements. We continue to improve and perform well in comparison to other Local Authorities around the numbers of care

leavers we have in education, training, and employment.

- Merton's Children in Care council 'Our Voice' was relaunched following the lockdowns and has continued to grow. Ofsted acknowledged our 'vibrant Young Inspectors team and... active Children in Care Council' which ensure that children's views influence decisions by elected members and senior officers. Corporate parenting across the council was recognised as a priority.
- A Coram Voice *Bright Spots Survey* was commissioned and concluded at the end of the year. The response rate was high and the results will inform the next Corporate Parenting Strategy.

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 2020/2021 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*¹. This legislation is accompanied by the DFE statutory guidance for local authorities - *Applying corporate parenting principles to looked-after children and care leavers*². 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. During this reporting year it was chaired by the council's Chief Executive at the time, Ged Curran, promoting a strong corporate parenting ethos across the Council and the wider children's partnership.

Context

Following the disruption of the 2020/2021 caused by Covid-19 this reporting year could be seen as a recovery year as our children and young people, the workforce and wider society started to adapt to a new normal. However, childhood goes too quickly and progression must always be the focus of professionals working with children. Continuous improvement is a value held tightly within the Corporate Parenting service and more than ever, the workforce demonstrated this over this reporting period.

In the first quarter Hannah Doody was promoted from the Director of Housing to become our new permanent CEO following the retirement of the long serving Ged Curran. The quarter also saw the internal promotion of Jane McSherry from Assistant Director of Education to the Director of Children Services. El Mayhew left Merton employment and Sue Myers was employed on a locum basis and given the challenging task of seeing through the major restructure to Children

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

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

Social Care services for which staff consultation started just before the period of this report (29th of March 2021). The purpose of this restructure was to ensure that: services were aligned to best deliver services, there was enough management capacity to deliver quality practice, and there were clear career pathways for the workforce. Even though achieving savings was not a motivation for this restructure (and nor was it an outcome), any restructure can have a heavy impact on workforce anxiety and this was no exception, especially after the pandemic-stricken year of 2020/2021.

However, this was managed with compassion from managers and with a workforce who never take their eyes off meeting the needs of children and young people. The new structure came into effect on the 1st of September. Regarding children in care and care experienced young people, the main improvement was that the majority of services relating to them were merged into the new singular ‘Corporate Parenting’ service which continued under the leadership of David Michael (since January 2020). The 3rd quarter also saw Dheeraj Chibber come into post as the new permanent Assistant Director of Children’s Social Care. The service continued to work continuously in achieving the best possible outcomes for our children and young people and were rewarded when Ofsted visited in February 2022 and graded the experiences and progress of children in care and care experienced young people as ‘outstanding’. This was matched with ‘outstanding’ in ‘the impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families’ and, ‘good’ for experiences and progress of children who need help and protection’.

Merton’s Pledge to our Children and Young People

Merton’s pledges are outlined in our Corporate Parenting Strategy 2019-2022 which is accompanied by an action plan that is monitored through the Corporate Parenting Board. Our pledges mirror 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 – 23³.

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.

³ [Merton Children and Young People's Plan | Merton Partnership](#)

Corporate Parenting Performance Activity 2020-21

Table 1

Numbers and Rates of Children in Care as of 31st March

	2018		2019		2020		2021		2022	
	Number	Rate/10K	Number	Rate/10K	Number	Rate/10K	Number	Rate/10K	Number	Rate/10K
Merton	155	33	159	34	154	32	142	30	122	26
London	9880	49	10020	50	10020	49	9640	47	9960	52
National	75370	64	78140	65	80000	67	80780	67	82170	70

Up until 2020, the numbers of children in care had remained stable between 150-160. Between 2020 and the end of this reporting year, the numbers had gradually decreased to 122 at the end of 2021/22. The pandemic contributed towards this drop with less unaccompanied asylum-seeking children entering care, but this drop also correlates with the implementation of Merton's Relationship based practice model. Merton's focus on supporting and enabling families to find solutions to ensure children grow up within their family networks, and only using care as a last resort, has resulted in less children entering care. This trend is mirrored across other areas of children social care specifically the numbers of children subjected to Public Law Outline and Child Protection Plans. The table below show that the decrease from the previous reporting year is not due to less children entering care, which suggests that we could expect our numbers to start stabilising moving forward. Various quality assurance work has also been undertaken due to the changes of pattern to ensure we are confident of our practice and children are being kept safe. This assurance was also reinforced by Merton's 2021 positive Ofsted inspection.

Table 2

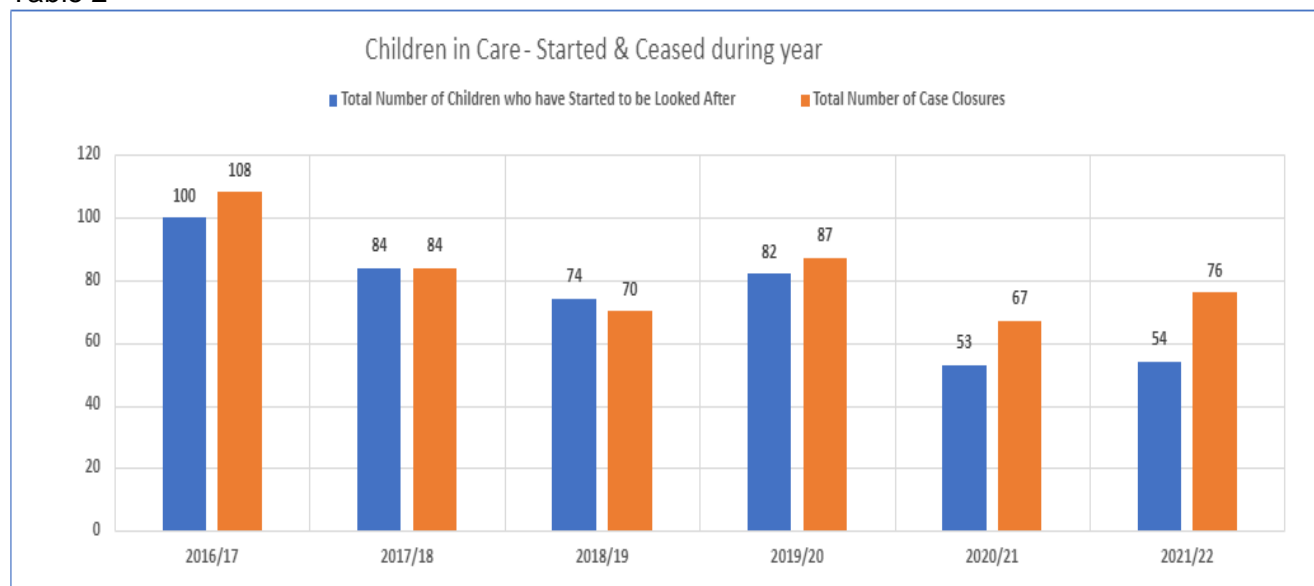
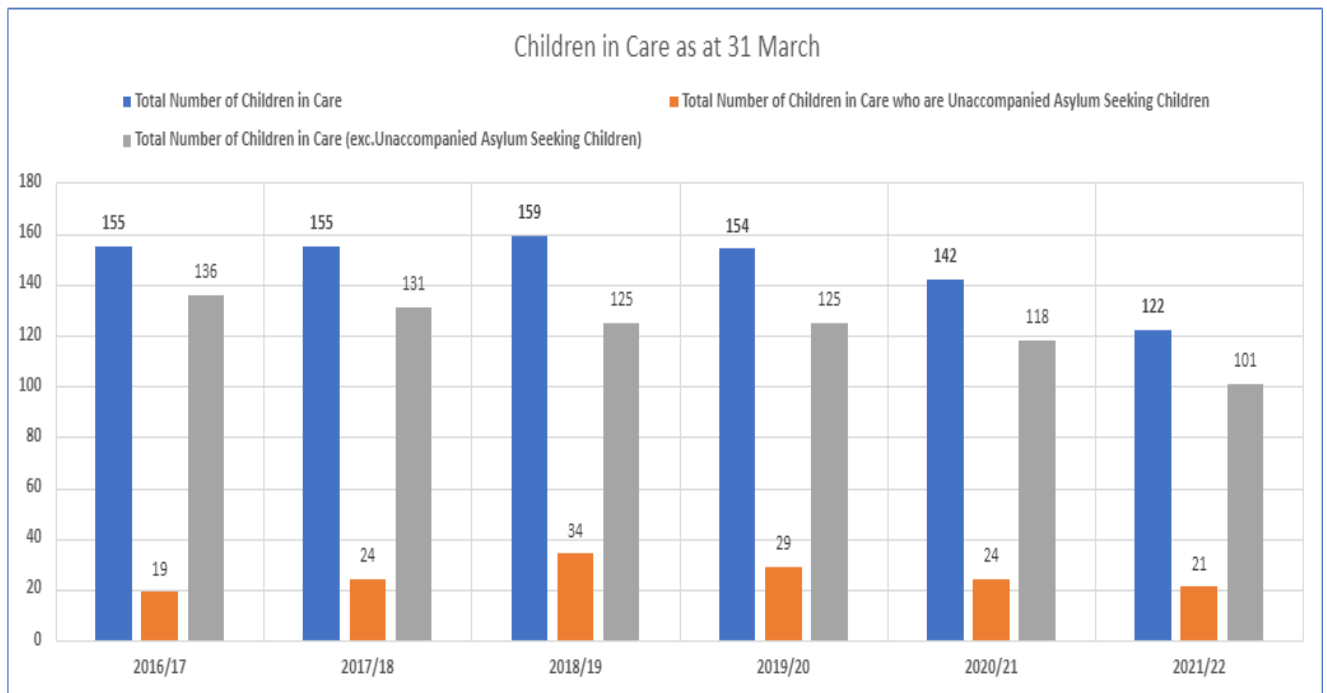


Table 3



The table above shows the numbers separating out the unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Comparing the year with the highest number (2018/2019) to this current one, you can see the decrease has been shared out between both cohorts. Following the drop of asylum seekers during the pandemic, the National Transfer Scheme which ensures equitable distribution of asylum seekers across the country was made mandatory. This move by the Central Government has mitigated an expected increase in numbers due to the rising numbers of asylum seekers widely reported in the national press. This increase may see numbers rise in the future as Merton's equitable quota of children we have agreed to take is 38 (based on 0.08% of the population).

Tables 1 shows the drop in Merton's numbers of children in care per 10,000 children. This is against the trend nationally. In the previous 4 years, Merton had mirrored the London trend; however, this year saw a London increase contrary to what occurred in Merton (Table 1). Table 4 below compares Merton with our statistical neighbours. We are significantly lower than most the other boroughs in the table. All the London boroughs in the table (to note Reading is not a London LA) bar Hillingdon are below the London average of 52 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. Research from the Trust for London on poverty shows that Merton has the lowest rates of poverty in London. We also have the 2nd lowest number of people sleeping rough (as seen by outreach workers) and have fewer families housed in temporary accommodation than the London average. However, pertinently, we are about average specifically regarding child poverty⁴.

Table 4

⁴ [Merton.pdf \(fra1.cdn.digitaloceanspaces.com\)](https://fra1.cdn.digitaloceanspaces.com/Merton.pdf)

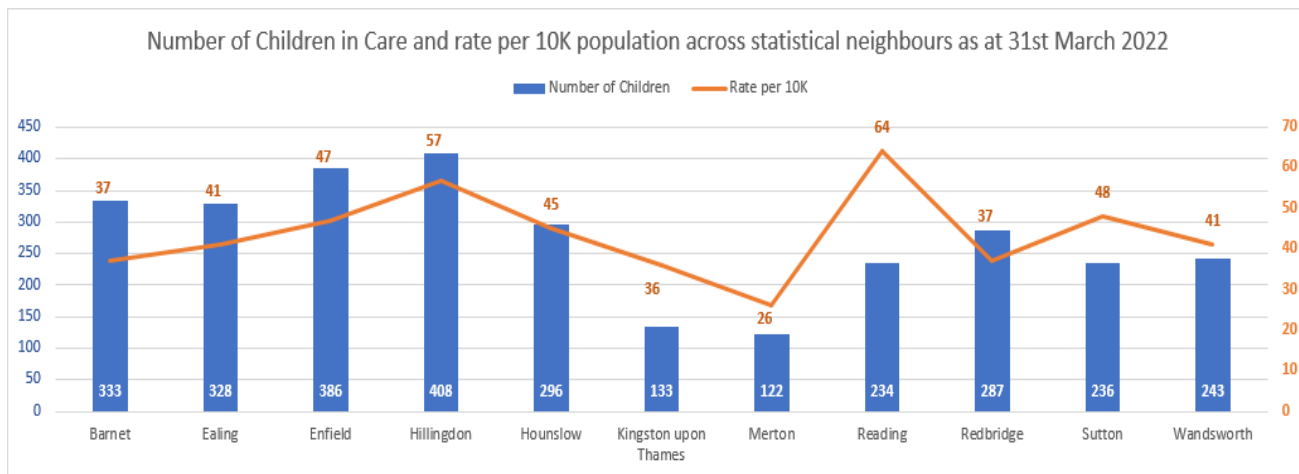
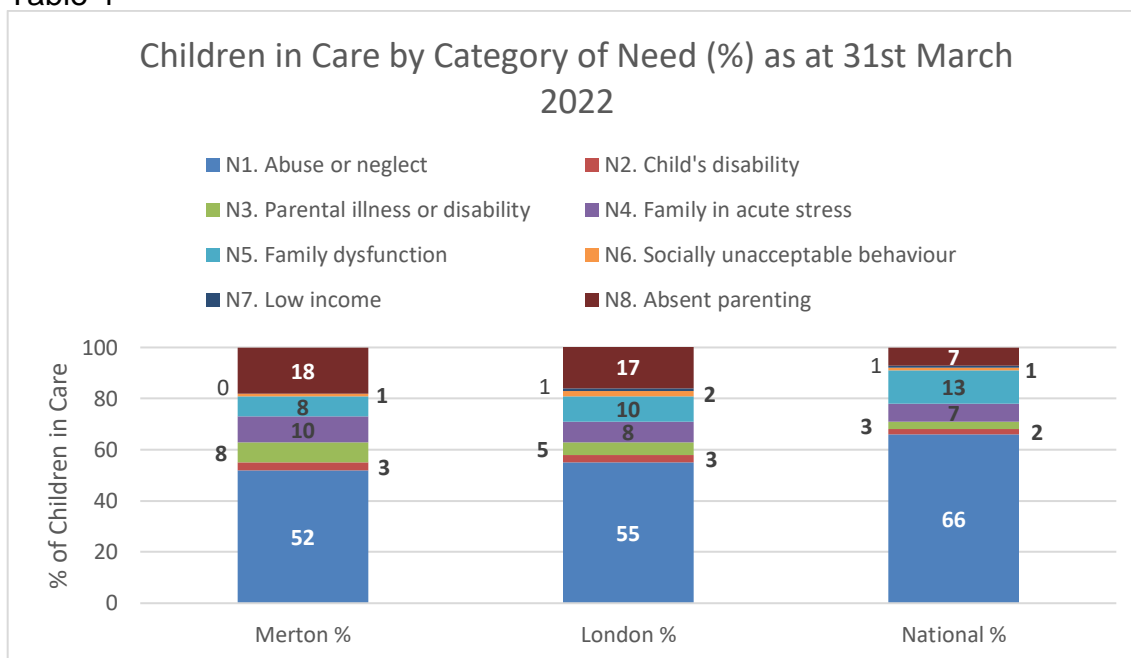


Table 4



The above is a comparative graph showing the reasons why children entered care. Merton is roughly in line with the London wide picture. There is a significant difference between London and the rest of the nation around abuse and neglect and absent parenting. This is most likely due to the higher number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children accommodated by London boroughs which are recorded as absent parenting. Given that the Central government has made participation in the National Transfer Scheme mandatory, we may see this balance out over the next few years.

Table 5

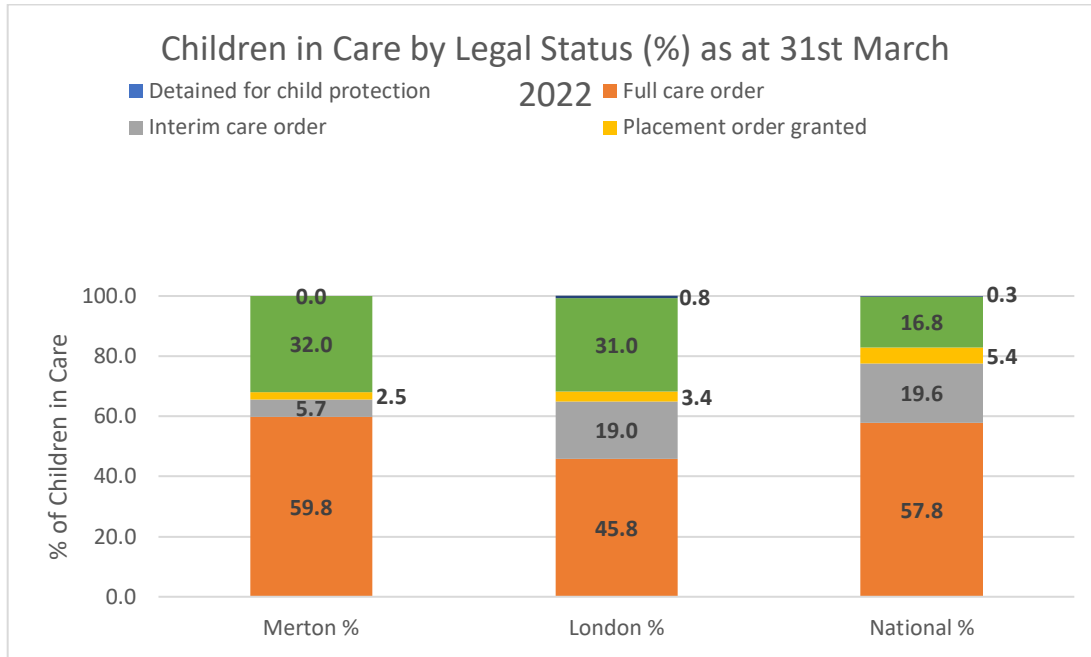
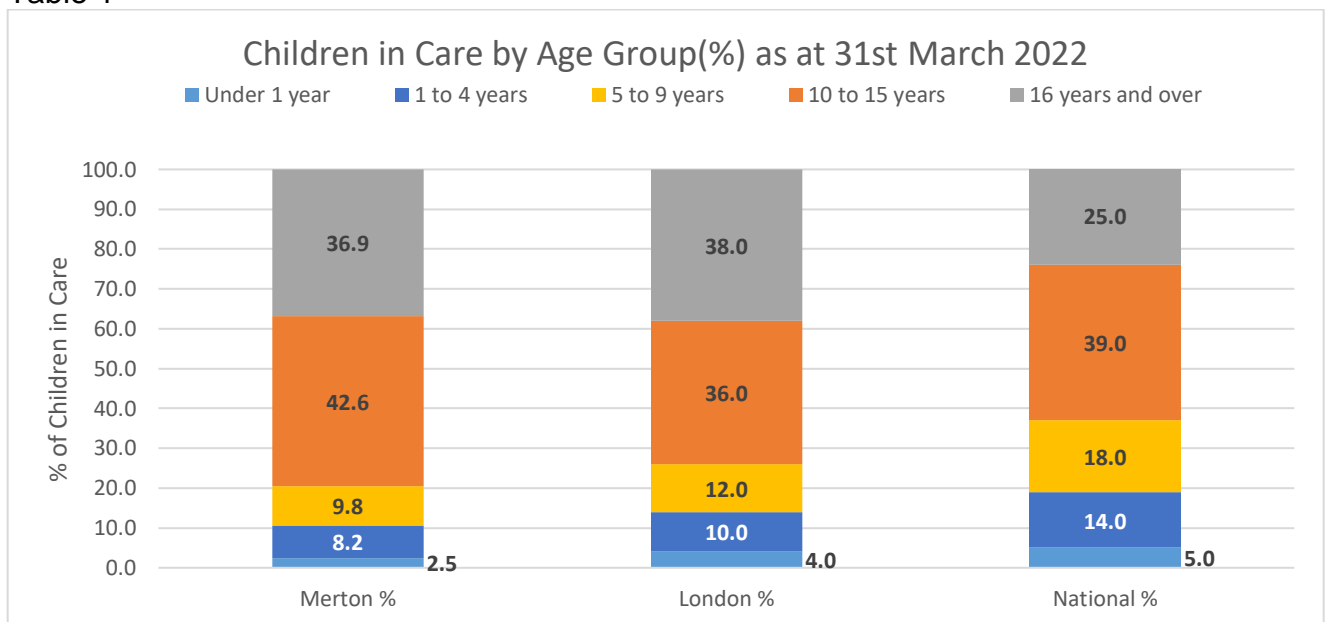


Table 5 shows that Merton had less interim care orders than the London and National average. This is in line with and for similar reasons to the drop in numbers of children entering care discussed earlier in this section. The disparity between London and Nationally around use of Section 20 is predominately around the higher number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children London accommodations.

III. Section 1: Demographics

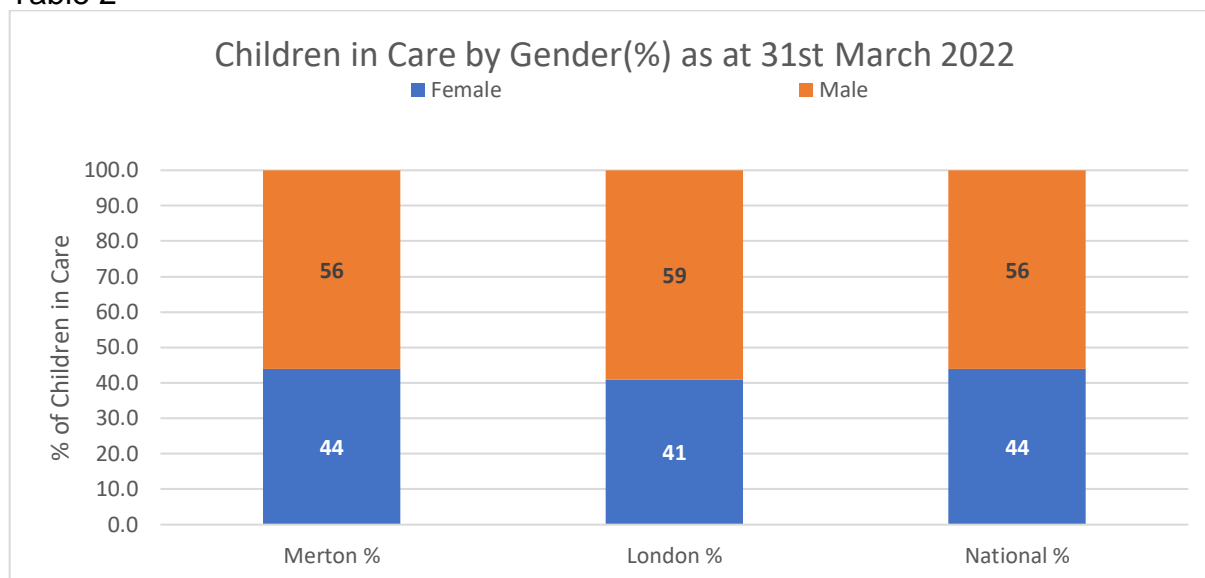
Table 1



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

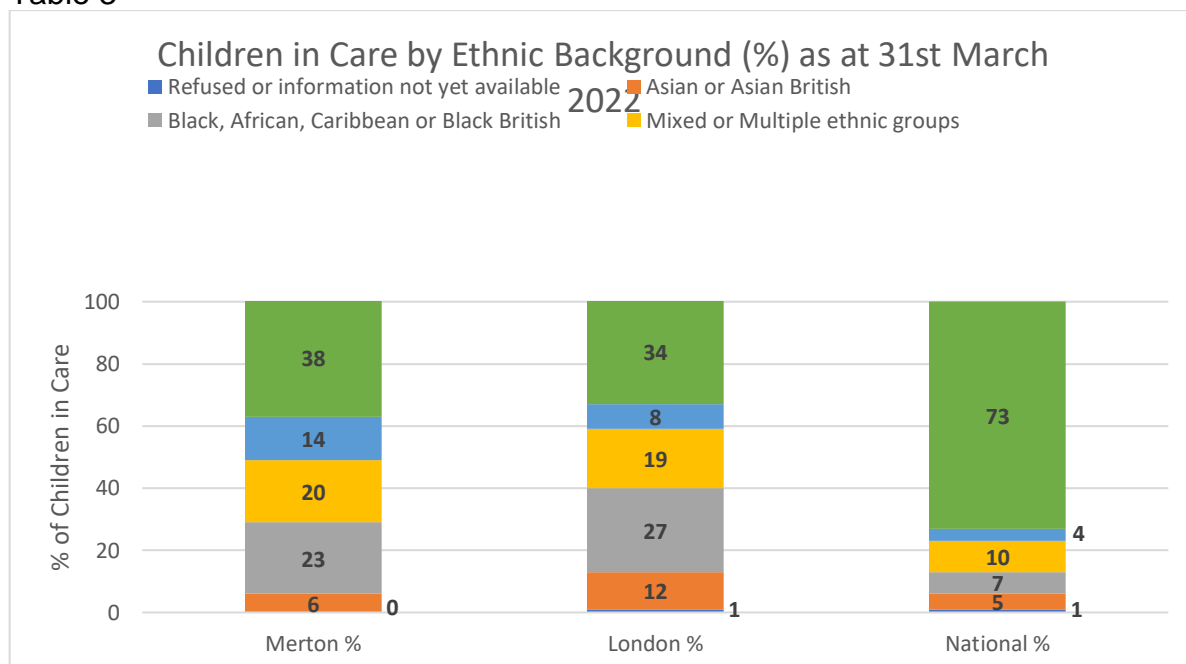
of contextual safeguarding concerns for adolescents. This snapshot shows that Merton has seen a rise in the % of 10–15-year-olds from the previous year (42.6% up from 34.5%), which is also significantly higher than London. Due to Merton’s low numbers, it is easier to have statistical fluctuations when anomalies occur. At the time of writing this report, the percentage of this cohort has decreased again to be more in line with London and National averages.

Table 2



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.

Table 3



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 a lack of trust in statutory services in 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

We strongly believe children have the right to, 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.

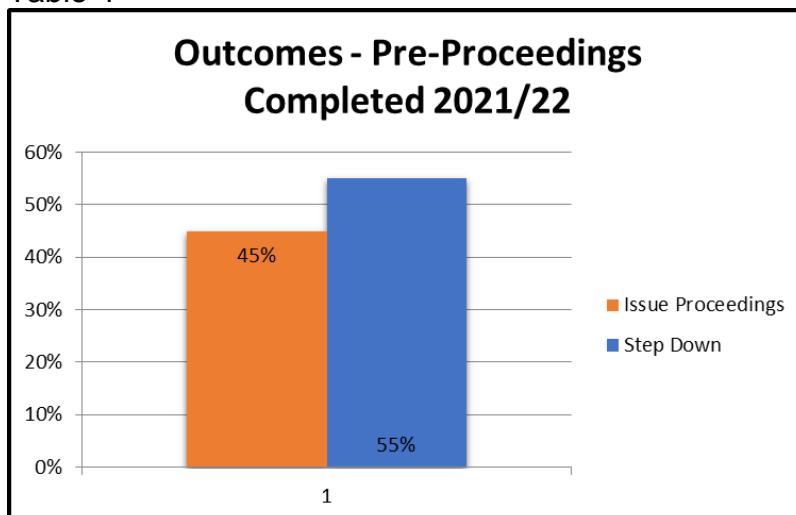
Pre-Proceedings

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 7 families (11 children) which was lower to the previous year (13 families, 21 children). Of the cases for which the pre-proceedings process was ended between April 2021 and March 2022, the average time spent in pre-proceedings was 25 weeks. (This is in line with the previous year which was at 27 weeks).

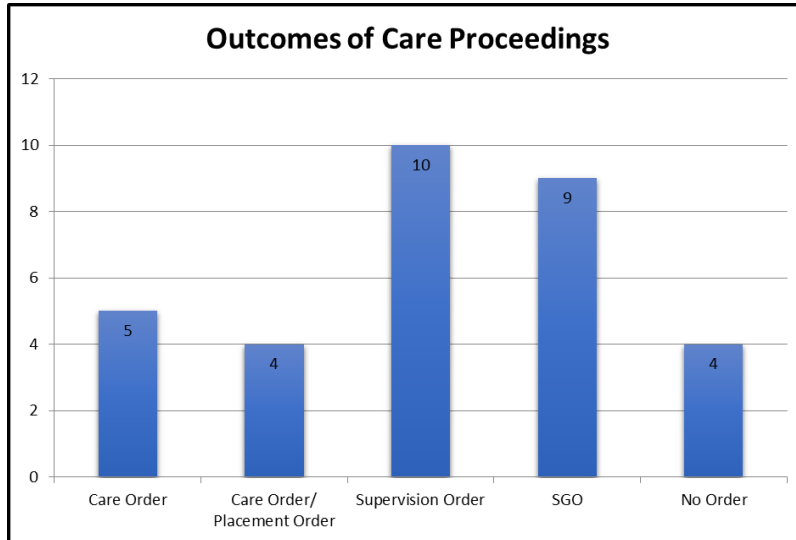
During the year, 11 families concluded pre-proceedings with 55% of families successfully stepping down and successfully diverted from entering proceedings. This was in line with the previous year's performance.

Table 4



Care Proceedings

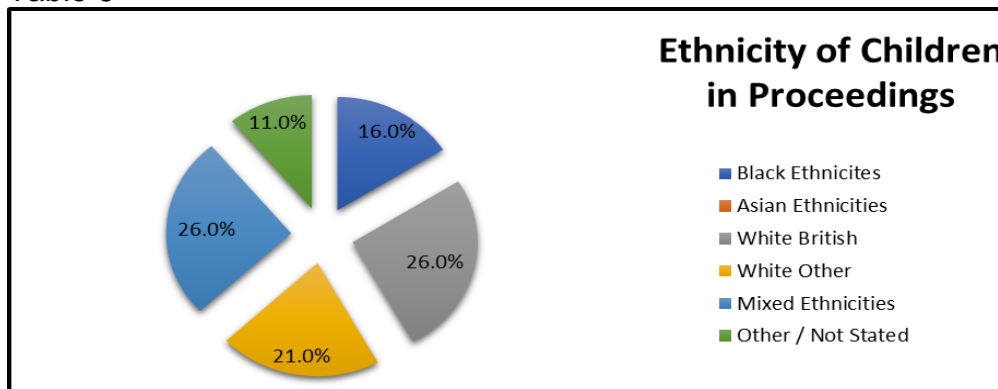
Table 5



During the reporting year, we issued proceedings for 13 families, consisting of 19 children. This was a decrease from the previous year when proceedings were issued for 19 families (40 children). During the reporting year, Merton concluded proceedings in a total of 17 cases, involving 32 children. Our average number of weeks spent in proceedings was 52 weeks which was an increase from the 46 week average during the 2020/2021 reporting year and considerably above the national target of 26-weeks. However, this must be considered in the context of the courts experiencing significant Pandemic related challenges such as lockdowns. Merton’s timeliness of proceedings was in line with other local authorities using the West London Court and our neighbouring boroughs.

All but 5 children who we concluded proceedings for experienced outcomes in which they were placed within their birth or wider family network. This is very positive and reflects the commitment Merton has to keeping children within their family. This is in line with the previous year when only 6 out of 40 children ended up being cared for by carers formerly unknown to them.

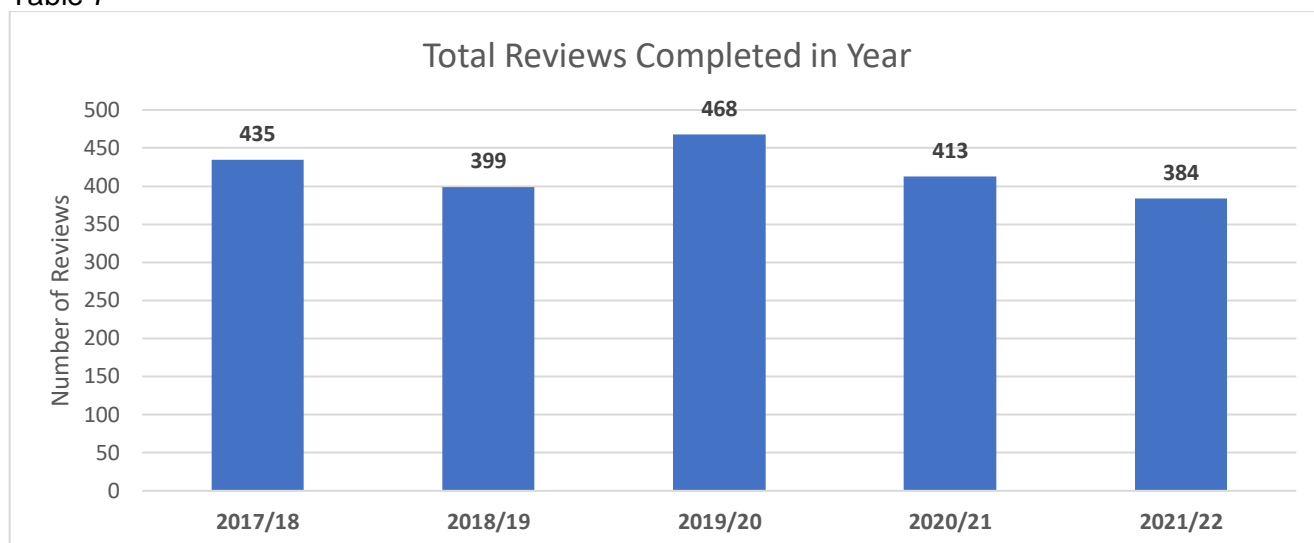
Table 6



We continue to challenge our interventions and ensure that families of Black and Asian backgrounds do not experience disproportionate statutory interventions without adequate early interventions. Our data currently indicates that families of Black, Asian and Mixed ethnicities are not overly represented in care proceedings for this period.

Children in Care Reviews

Table 7



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. 97% of reviews were held within statutory timescales.

Table 8

Method of Participation at Review	2021/22		2020/21	
PN0 – Child Aged under 4 at time of review	40	11%	42	10%
PN1 – Child physically attends and speaks for him/her self	216	57%	247	60%
PN2 – Child physically attends and an advocate speaks on his/her behalf	5	1%	4	1%
PN3 – Child attends and conveys his/her views symbolically (non-verbally)	1	0%	3	1%
PN4 – Child physically attends, but does not speak for him/her self, does not convey his/her views symbolically (non-verbally) and does not ask an advocate to speak for him/her	4	1%	4	1%
PN5 – Child does not attend physically, but briefs an advocate to speak for him/her	6	2%	14	3%
PN6 – Child does not attend, but conveys his/her feelings to the review by a facilitative medium	64	17%	71	17%
PN7 - child did not attend and views not conveyed	35	9%	28	7%
Not recorded	6	2%	0	0%
TOTAL	377	100%	413	100%

The graph above shows that 88% of children above the age of 4, participated in their review by some means. 67% of reviews had the child in attendance (excluding children under 5).

IV. 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 1 July 2019 most of Merton's adoption functions were transferred to Adopt London South (ALS), alongside eight other South London local authorities. Whilst there were initial teething issues, most have settled down and regular practices established. The Permanency Lead who moved to the Corporate Parenting Service post the restructure is also the Adoption Link with Adopt London South. She has regular meetings with the ALS designated Merton link and they enjoy a strong working relationship.

During the year, 3 children were adopted. The average time between these children entering care and moving in with their adoptive families was 435 days and below the national average. This was higher than the previous year. The average over the 2-year period was 378 Days. One of the three children was from a Black, Asian or minority ethnic community. At the end of the reporting year, there were 4 children with placement orders waiting to be adopted. All had been matched and were living with their prospective adopters.

Children with Plans for Long Term Foster Care.

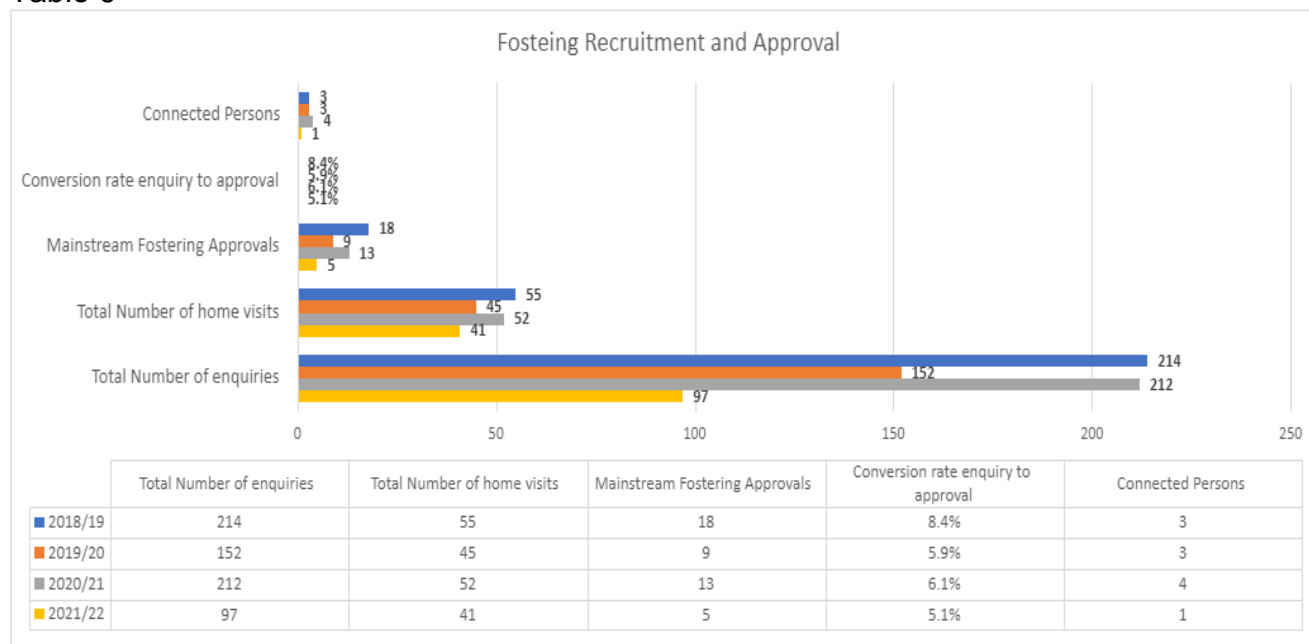
There has been a focus on permanence over the previous 2 years. A lot of work was undertaken to ensure meaningful permanence planning meetings were taking place for children and Life Story Work was being undertaken to ensure children had an understanding and positive narrative of their journey into, and through care. Training had been provided by external, reputable trainers before an internal training offer was established by our own Permanency Lead following their transfer into the Corporate Parenting Service post-restructure.

Following this focus on permanency, the service was delighted that our dedication to pursuing timely permanence for all children if they cannot live safely with their birth families was recognised as a strength by Ofsted. The specific details of children in long term foster care, relating to their permanence, are not collated by the Department for Education (DfE) nor reportable in our Mosaic case management system. However, the service does hold this data and tracks it. At the end of quarter 3 in the reporting year this paper covers, we had 53 children, under the age of 16, in long term foster care. 29 of these children had been matched with their carers, 17 were living with their prospective long-term fostering carers. Only 7 children were living in a home which was not going to be their long-term home. The network around a child holds a permanency planning meeting for all children who are not yet matched with their long-term carers. A file audit of 17-children showed evidence of direct work and life story work being

undertaken with 82% of them. The importance of meaningful direct work and the link between this and achieving permanence is well understood in the service and we will continue to improve on our practice.

Fostering Recruitment

Table 9



It has been a particularly challenging year of fostering recruitment. The numbers of enquiries and approvals are significantly lower than previous years. Merton has a dedicated, part time, fostering recruitment officer who links in with other Local Authorities. Anecdotally, feedback has been that what Merton is seeing is reflected elsewhere. However, as reported last year, this downturn correlates with their being no dedicated budget for fostering recruitment. There was a rise in enquiries in 2020/21 which could have been due to positive community spirit harnessed during the lockdowns. Similarly, the drop in the 2021/22 could have been due to that community spirit waning due to pandemic fatigue or the following cost of living crises. The national shortage of foster carers is well documented, and we need to think more creatively than ever around our sufficiency strategy. Merton joined the *Commissioning Alliance* which has 35 Local Authorities as members and *The London Permanence Partners*. Both these groups look to share ideas and best practice around fostering recruitment and consider how we can work together to meet the challenges faced in placement sufficiency.

Fostering Support

Children are cared for in a variety of settings; foster care, children’s homes, residential special schools, and a small number are in hospital settings. Some children in our care are placed in secure settings. On 31 March 2022, 85% of children in our care were placed in foster care which is the same as 2021. This is above the national figure of 71%. 72% of children in foster care were living with in-house foster carers. At the end of March 2022, we had 76 approved foster households (67 mainstream and 9 connected carer households), which was a decrease on the previous year when we had 81 fostering households. There are also 14 care leavers still living in their inhouse foster homes under ‘*staying put*’ arrangements.

Excitingly, this year saw the launch of our first Mockingbird Constellation on the 3rd of June 2021. The Mockingbird Family Model of fostering looks to replicate strong and supportive extended family networks for fostering households through creating a community with 6-10 other foster households (called a constellation). 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 families⁵. The project's implementation was delayed due to the pandemic but since the launch it has gone from strength to strength.

Children and Young People Living in Other Settings

Whilst we believe 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 the best possible residential children's home to meet their individual needs. As of 31 March 2022, we had 6 children living in residential children's homes. One child from this cohort lives in a residential home due to having a disability that requires a higher level of care than foster care can provide. We have two other children living with disabilities who reside in residential school settings. Case management responsibility for these three children is held within the Children with Disabilities team and the decision to place in residential care is primarily made for health reasons. Decisions to place a child in residential settings are taken 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 nor 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 stepping-stone to having their own tenancy. However, as this provision is not regulated by Ofsted the variability in quality between provision can be significant. To mitigate the risk of unregulated provision, we have embedded our own internal quality assurance process for SIA's accommodating our children. We also only use SIA accommodation that is 24-hour staffed. 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 5 young people living in SIA provision, which was a decrease from 14 the previous year.

Nationally, because of the shortage of residential care and foster homes, local authorities are sometimes forced into using SIA provision to accommodate children who require *care* when no appropriate regulated accommodation can be found. Merton has found itself in this position for a tiny number of children. As of 31st of March 2022, Merton had 1 child placed in SIA accommodation whose needs required a regulated children's home. To ensure the safety and progress of the child, we had a robust safety plan that was shared with both the court and Ofsted.

⁵ [Mockingbird programme \(thefosteringnetwork.org.uk\)](https://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk)

How Far Our Children Live from Merton

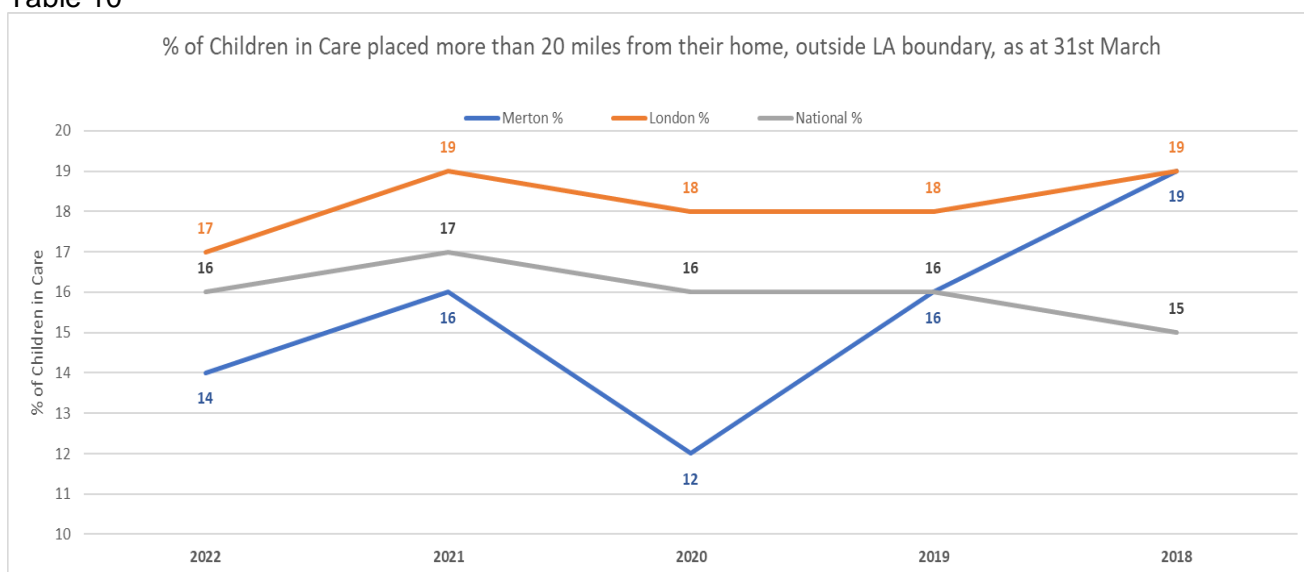
We always try to keep children living either in or as close to Merton as possible. There are many advantages to this, with the most important being to make ongoing meaningful contact between children and their birth families/networks easier to nurture. However, it is also advantageous to use Merton’s 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 collaborative commissioning programmes. Currently we are members of London Care Solutions and The South London Commissioning Programme.

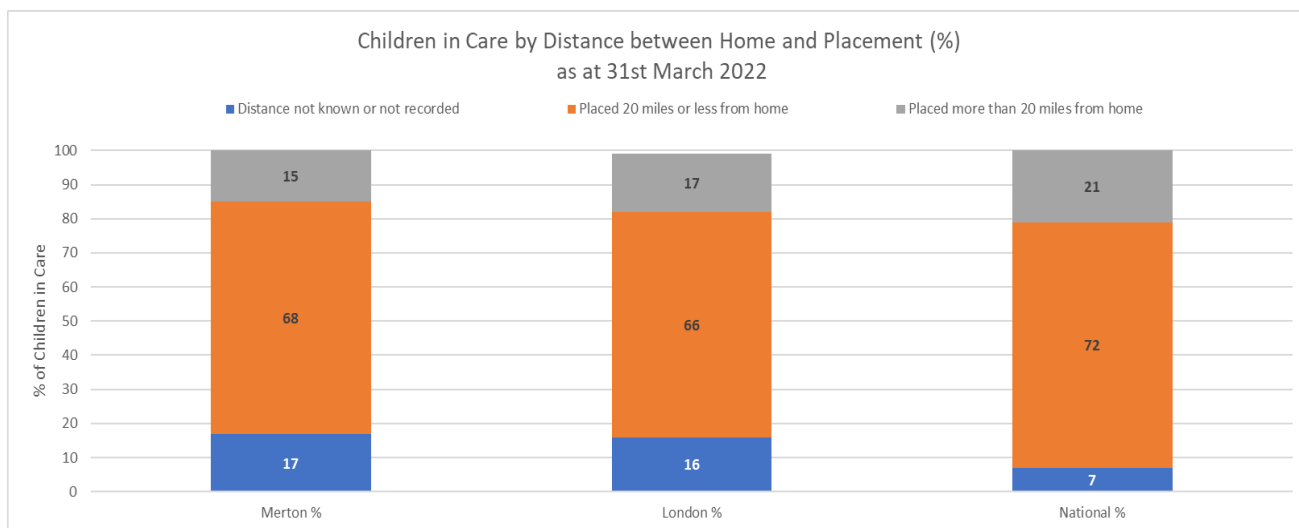
Placement Location

Table 10



However, Merton is not alone in these challenges. Positively this year has seen a slight decrease which is also mirrored in London and Nationally. We are ambitious about continuing this trend and are currently looking at options to create more post-18 accommodation in borough for care experienced young people. The table below shows that we perform well in comparison to our London neighbours and nationally.

Table 11

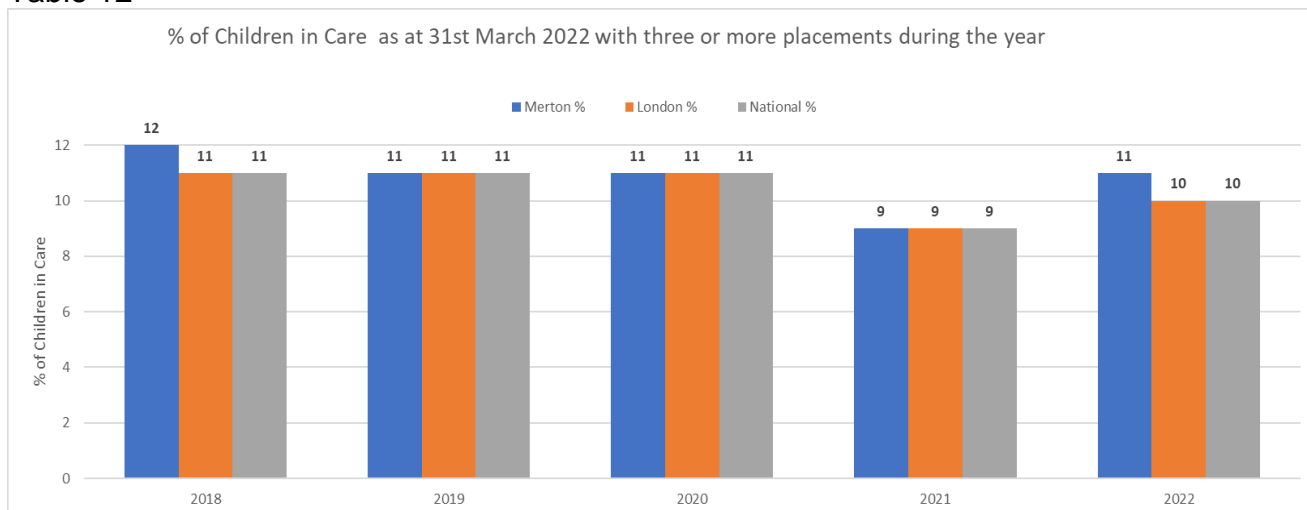


'Distance not known or not recorded' includes unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Placement Stability

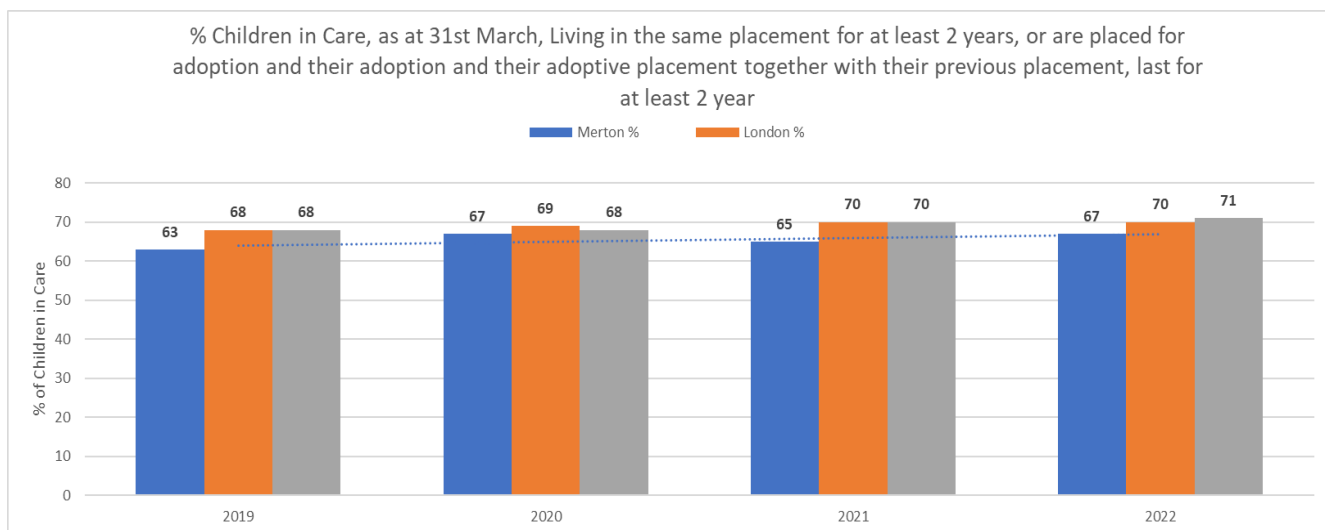
All our efforts to improve how effectively we achieve permanence for children is based on the principle that providing a child with a stable, loving home is key to them thriving and growing up to live happy, full lives. Our dedication to achieving stability for our children is what inspired us to invest in the Mockingbird Model of Fostering as discussed in the fostering support section.

Table 12



The above graph shows that we are in line with London and National figures of children who have experienced 3 or more placement moves within a year.

Table 13



Permanence and stability through children having a sense of belonging and being loved is at the forefront of our ambitions. All children who haven't achieved permanence have regular permanency planning meetings which are tracked through fortnightly meetings chaired by a service manager. Fragile placements are monitored at the weekly Children in Care monitoring meeting chaired by the Head of Service to ensure robust operational work is being undertaken to ensure the best possible outcomes for children.

V. Section 4: Health

Initial Health Assessments (IHA) are delivered through the Epsom and St Helier NHS Trust. They reported that 43% of children had their IHA in timescale after breach exceptions were considered. However, without the agreed exceptions only 10% of children were seen within the 28-day statutory time frame. This is an area that the partnership is striving to improve. Significant improvements were achieved in the timeliness of paperwork through the implementation of weekly monitoring meetings. Unfortunately, these improvements coincided with the NHS experiencing significant staffing at Epsom and St Helier's. Partnership work is ongoing to ensure we see improvement in IHA's.

Review Health Assessments (RHA) are undertaken by the Looked After Children Nurse who works for the Central London Community Health Care Trust, but is co-located in Merton's Civic Centre with the social work teams. 138 RHAs were undertaken during the year, with 96% in timescales. This is above the national and London averages (89% and 92%) and is a testament to the commitment of our dedicated looked after care nurses.

Performance on immunisations are tracked for children who have been in care for longer than 12-months. 76% of these children had their immunisations up to date, which was a decrease from the 82% the previous reporting year. The percentage of children with an up-to-date dental check was 89% at the end of March 2022. This was up from 63% at the same time the previous year which was low due to the pandemic. Regarding dental checks, Merton has recovered much better than many other Local Authorities with the London average being 69% and National 70%. This is a credit to the strong working relationships between social workers, fostering carers and looked after children nurses.

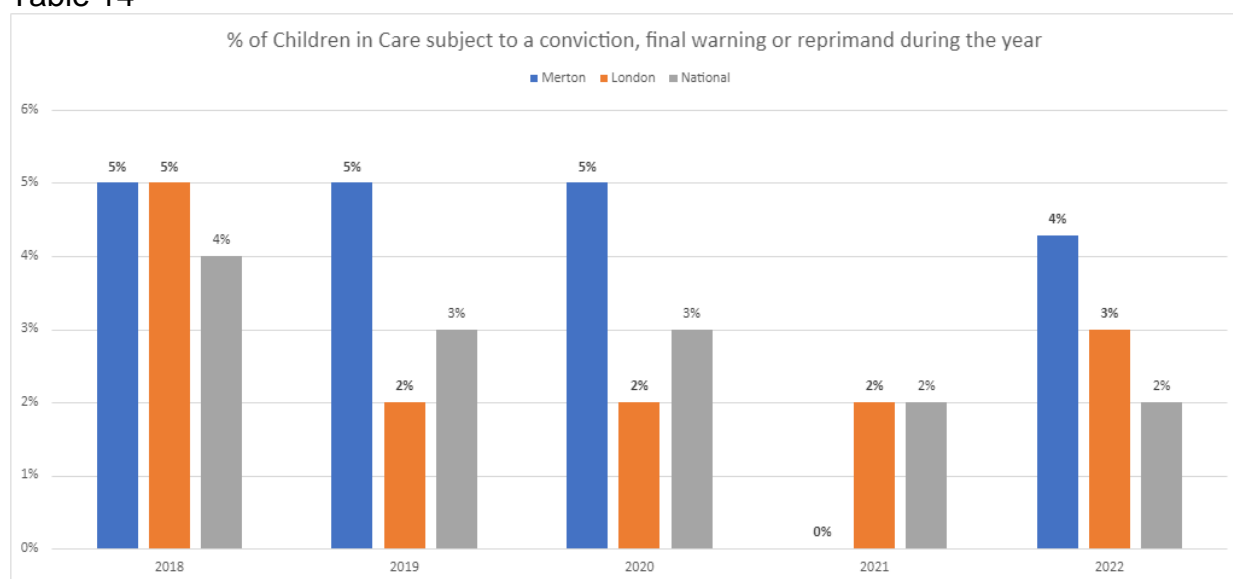
Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQ) are sent out to all children, carers and schools for children between the ages of 5-16 years old. SDQ are tools used to assess and monitor

children’s emotional well-being. Encouragingly we achieved an 87% completion which was above both the London and National averages (85 & 77).

Section 5 Offending

Because no Merton child in care was given a substantial outcome in relation to offending behaviour in 2020/2021, 2022 was always likely to show an increase in offenses. Merton’s 4% of children subjected to a conviction, final warning or reprimand represents only 2 children. Merton’s very small numbers of children in care over the age of criminal responsibility (70), a single child receiving an order can have a significant impact on our statistics. In the last five years, Merton have had no more than 4 children in care receive a substantive outcome through the criminal justice system.

Table 14



Missing and Child Exploitation

In line with other London boroughs, the numbers of children in care going missing have increased since Covid-19 and remain significantly higher than national average. In Merton, our numbers of children leaving placements without authorisation and children going missing are both 1% higher than other London boroughs.

There has been a lot of work with families, carers, and placements to ensure that children and young people are being reported missing appropriately, and we think this improvement in practice is responsible for the statistical increase shown below. All missing children are monitored closely through Merton’s multi-agency Missing Panel which in turn feeds into the MACE Strategic Panel. Most of our young people who go missing are male, and aged 14-18.

Table 15

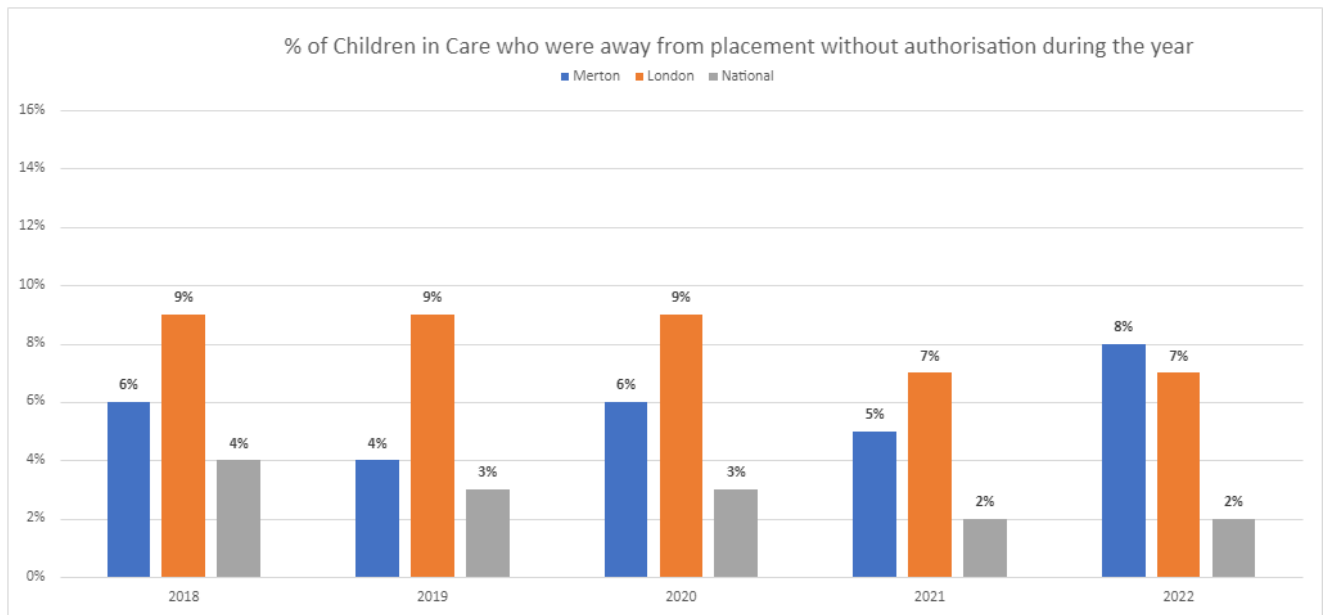
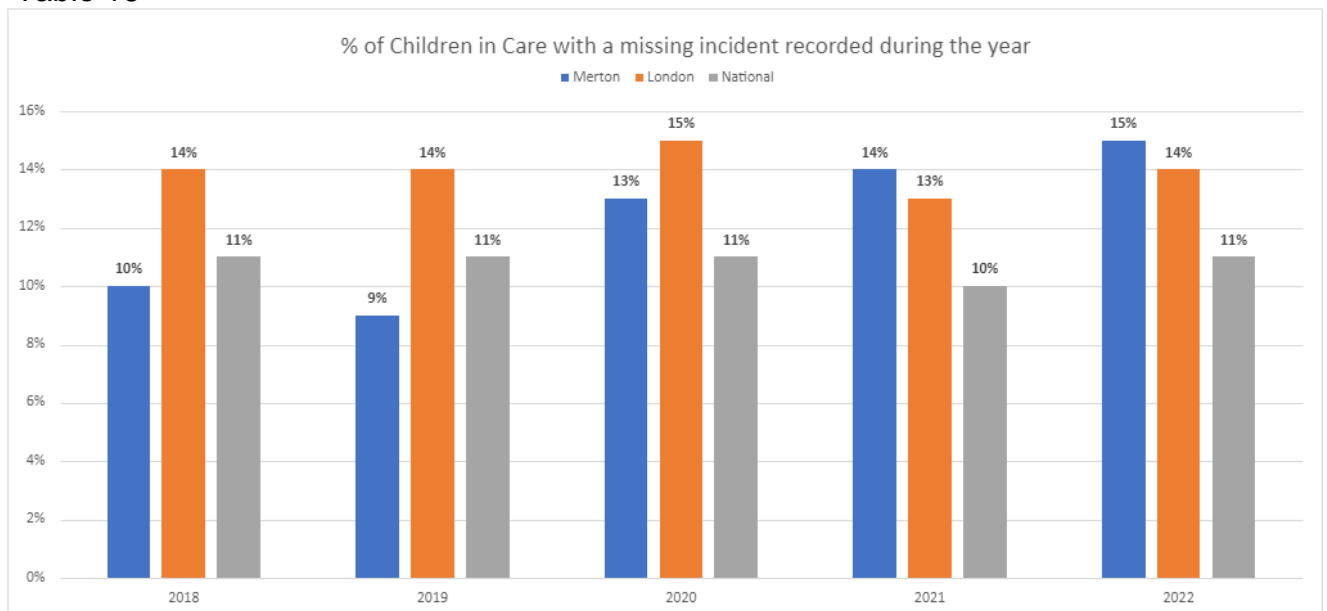


Table 16



The borough continues to develop and strengthen its awareness and understanding of the contextual harm risks within Merton. This is done by partnership working with the police, Catch 22, detached youth work and other community partnerships and agencies.

VI. Section 6: Education

“The work of the virtual school team is excellent. Strong strategic leadership and management oversight by the virtual school headteacher mean that outcomes for children looked after are consistently good. Innovative approaches that enable children to reach their full potential start from a very young age and continue throughout their school time and beyond. Virtual schoolteachers know children well, tracking their progress and swiftly intervening when necessary. As a result, outcomes for most children improve when they enter care. Attendance at school or college for children in care is high. Support for children placed outside the local

authority area is as strong as it is for those within the borough. Staff work very closely with designated teachers and school leaders. Pupil premium funding supports individual tuition where children are not making expected progress. Personal education plans are highly effective, and targets are precise and helpful for children (Ofsted Children Social Care Inspection Report 2022)”

Merton has a dedicated virtual school who work closely alongside schools, carers and social work teams. Following the disrupted year which impacted all students across the nation, getting children back into school routines has been a challenge. Merton’s children in care attendance was 91% with primary being 97%. The Virtual School Advisory Teachers attend all PEPs (Personal Education Plans) to ensure that support being provided to our children is of the highest level with the completion rate of PEPs being 100%.

Some key outcomes across the year included:

- 62.5% of children consistently made academic progress against their own targets each term. Of those who did not make progress earlier in the year, 43% made progress as the academic year went on.
- Of the children in Key Stage 2, 68% achieved the standard in reading, writing and mathematics combined which was higher than the Nation and regional figure for children in care and even the rate of all Merton children (National CLA 32%; Regional CLA 36% and Merton All Children 61.1%).
- Merton had 16 undergraduate students during the year. 2 of these were post graduate, 1 of whom obtained a master’s degree. One young person secured a First-class degree in BA Hons Business Management, Enterprise and Entrepreneurship.

The Virtual School Headteacher’s Annual Report 2021/2022 contains further details. This will be shared at the Virtual School Steering Group and subsequently the Corporate Parenting Board in March 2023.

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

Children’s Social Care has a range of duties and powers to provide advice and assistance to eligible care experienced young people. 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.

Care Experienced Young People in Touch

The below graphs show Merton’s performance around keeping ‘in touch’ with our care experienced young people. Keeping in touch is a statutory duty which ensures that local authorities are making proactive attempts to engage care leavers and ensure that they are living in suitable accommodation and progressing in education, training or employment. The graphs show continued improvement in the 19-21 cohort which saw it raise from 88% in 2021 to 92% in 2022.

Table 17

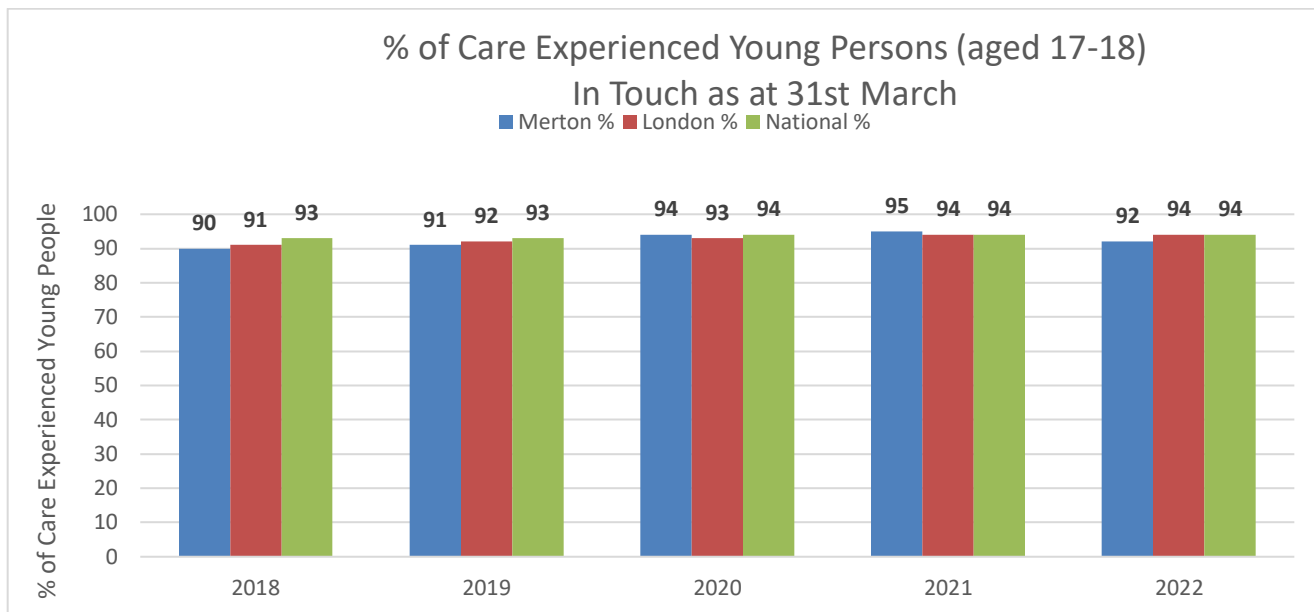
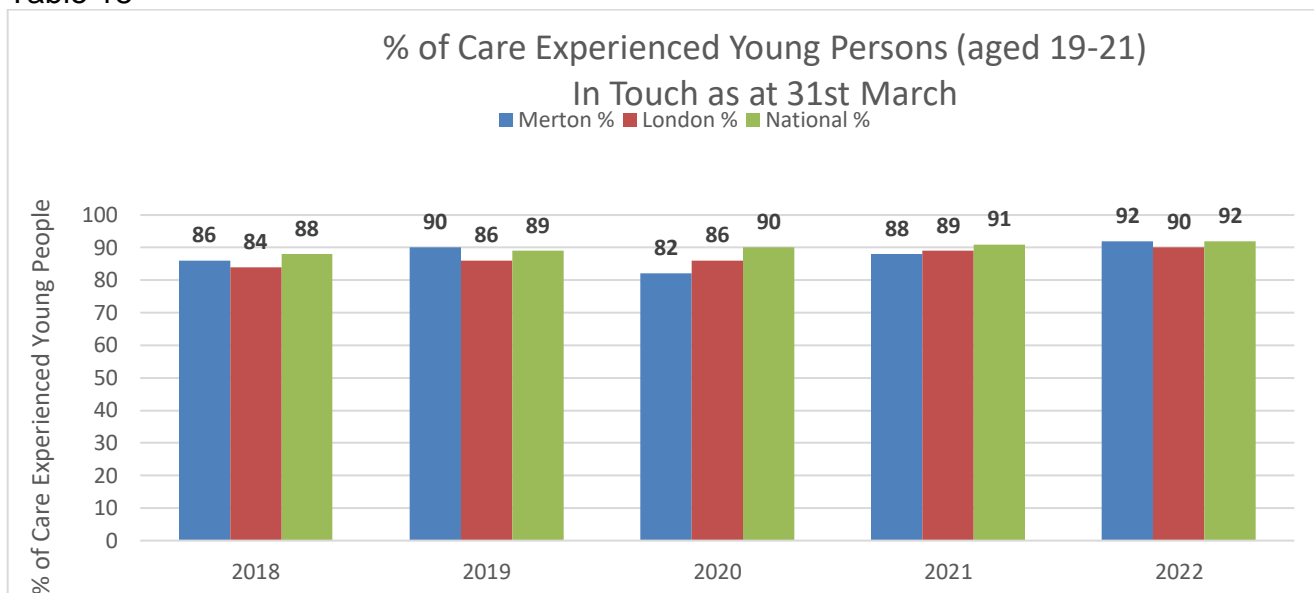


Table 18



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 charts below compare Merton with our neighbours and nationally around the numbers of care experienced young people in suitable accommodation over a 5-year period.

Table 19

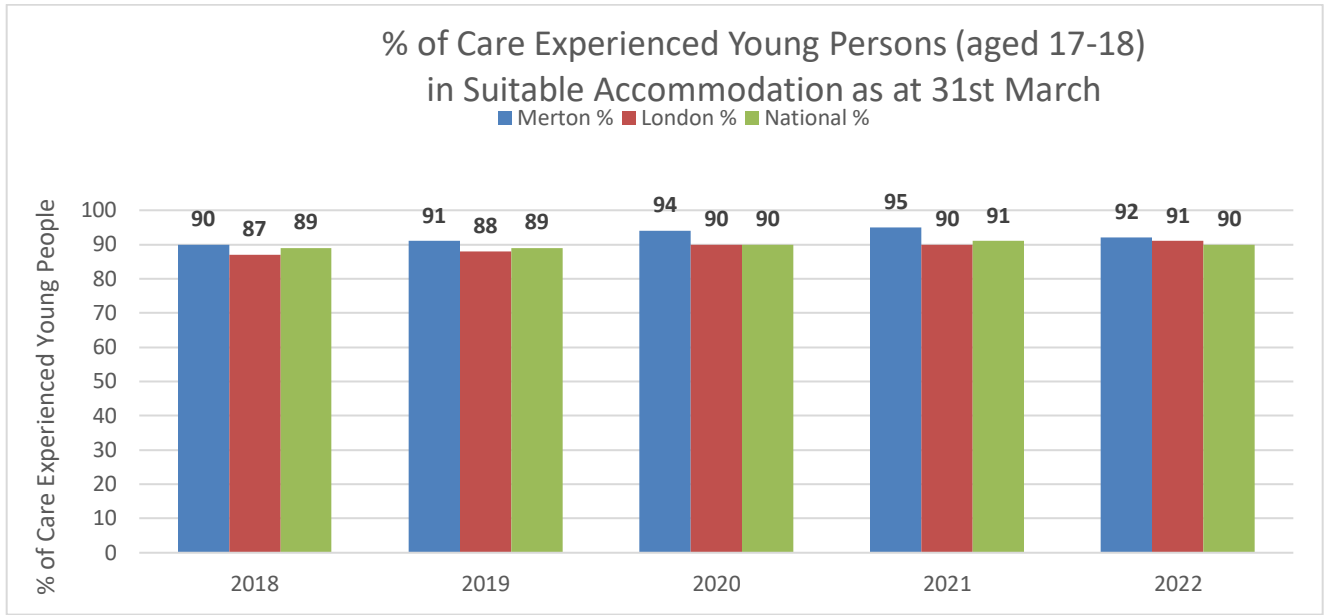
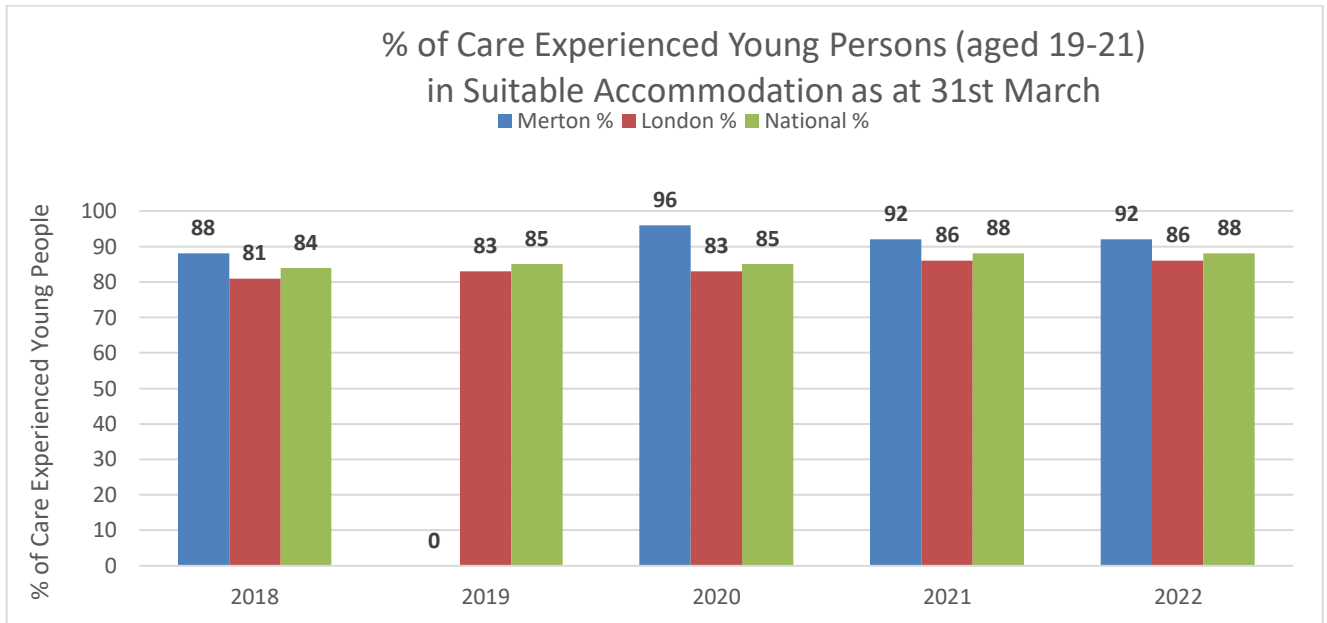
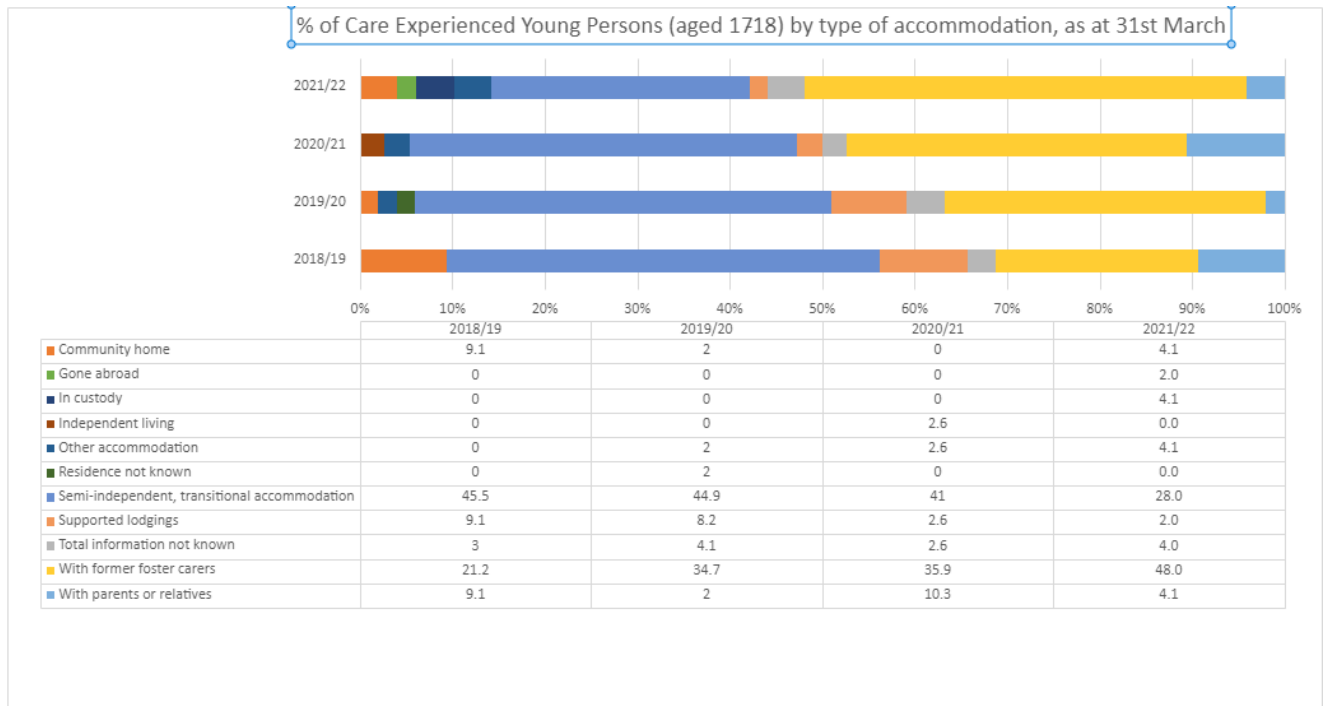


Table 20



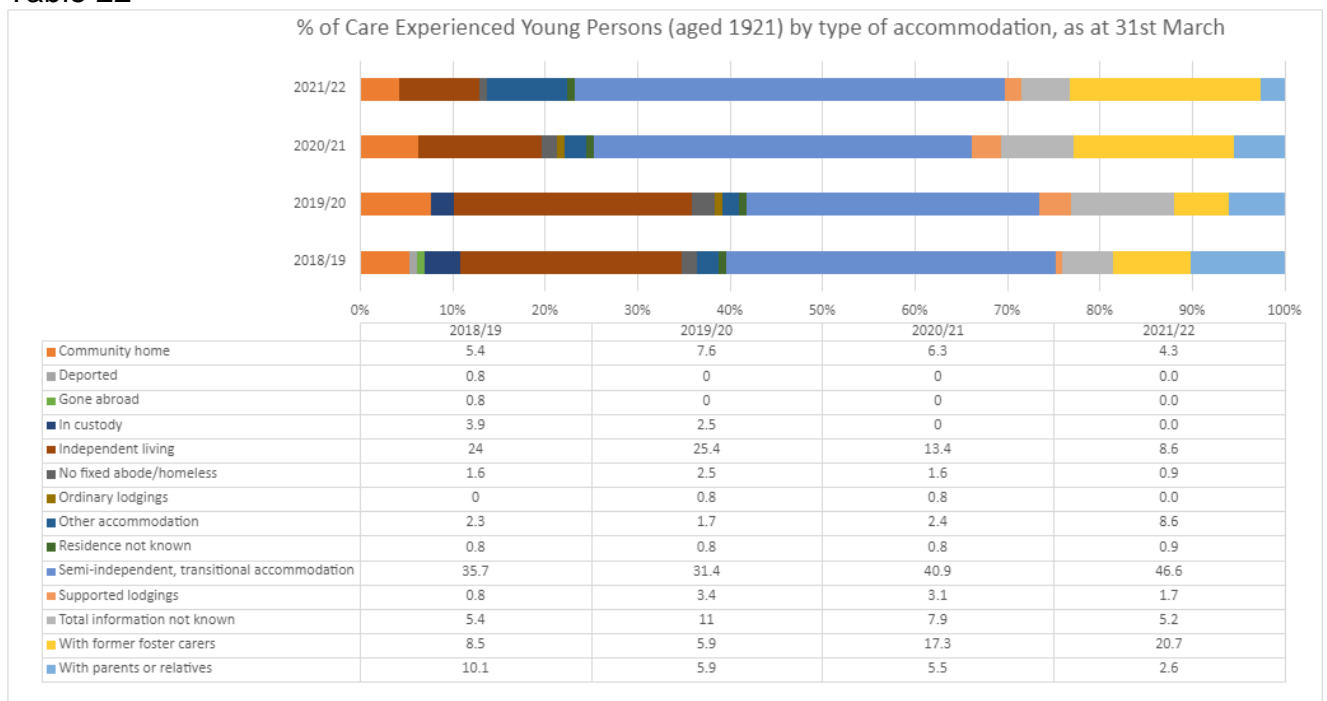
The graphs show that Merton continues to perform well comparatively with other local authorities.

Table 21



The above shows the types of accommodation our 18-year-olds are living in. It is very positive to see the high numbers of care experienced young people *staying put* with their former foster carers, which is in line with our belief that the best place to prepare for adulthood is within a loving family environment.

Table 22



The above graphs shows a dip in the number of young people moving onto independent accommodation. This is partly due to the pandemic and ongoing housing pressures causing the average age when young people receive their tenancies to rise. The high numbers of 19

and 20-year olds remaining with their former foster carers shows the commitment the fostering community has to our children.

Care Leavers in Education, Employment or Training (EET)

A good standard of education is a key driver towards achieving positive employment outcomes in adulthood. Positively, we have continued to improve supporting our care leavers into education, training and employment. We have risen from 69% to 82% with 18-year-olds, and from 58% to 65% of 19-21-year-olds being in some form of Education, Employment and Training (EET).

Table 23

Care Experienced Young Persons Activity as at 31st March (Aged 17-18)	2017/18		2018/19		2019/20		2020/21		2021/22	
	Merton	National	Merton	National	Merton	National	Merton	National	Merton	National
Total in Education, Employment or Training	59%	64%	79%	64%	67%	64%	69%	65%	82%	66%
Total information not known	10%	6%	3%	6%	6%	6%	3%	5%	4%	6%
Total not in Education, Employment or Training	31%	30%	18%	30%	27%	31%	28%	30%	14%	28%

Care Experienced Young Persons Activity as at 31st March (Aged 19-21)	2017/18		2018/19		2019/20		2020/21		2021/22	
	Merton	National	Merton	National	Merton	National	Merton	National	Merton	National
Total in Education, Employment or Training	45%	51%	66%	52%	50%	53%	58%	52%	65%	55%
Total information not known	13%	10%	5%	9%	11%	9%	6%	7%	6%	7%
Total not in Education, Employment or Training	43%	39%	29%	39%	39%	39%	35%	41%	29%	38%

The below graphs show that Merton is doing well in comparison to London and National averages.

Table 24

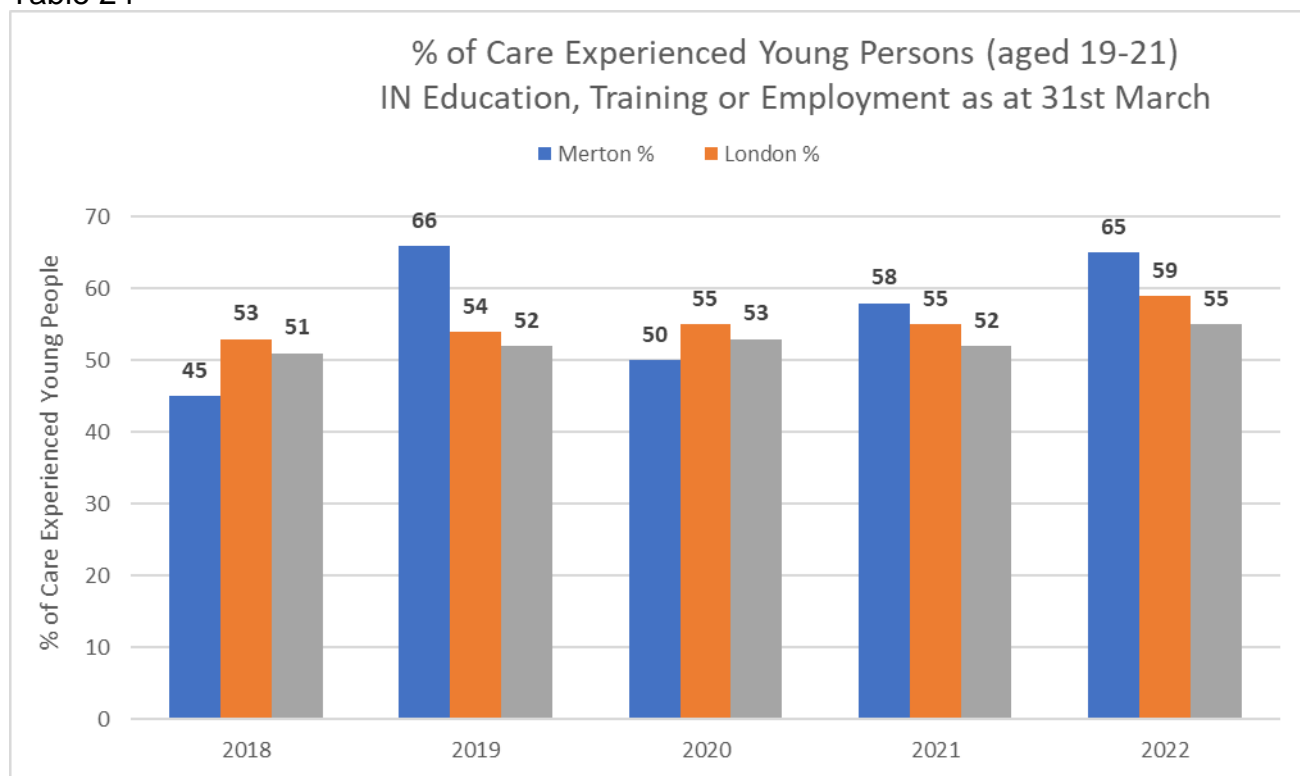
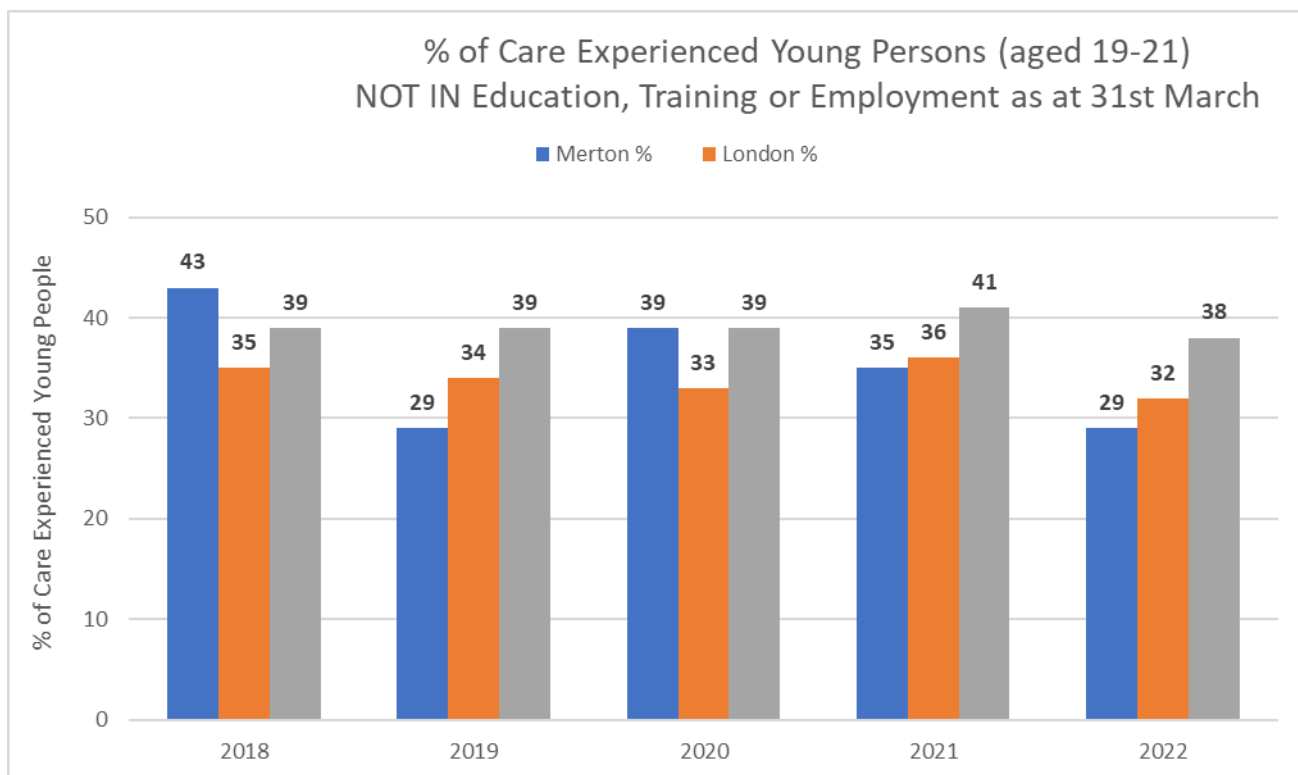


Table 25



Whilst the above performance is encouraging, we know that EET is an area which we must continue to strive for excellence in and have high ambitions for our young people. We continue to have monthly NEET (Not in Employment, Education and Training) panels to track and discuss our young people not in EET and what further actions we can take to support them into positive activity. The panel is chaired by one of our 16+ Team Managers and also has colleagues from the My Futures Team and the dedicated advisory teacher from our Virtual School who supports the young people finding it the most challenging to transition into, or remain in EET.

Participation and Children in Care Council (CICC)

For contextual reasons discussed in previous annual reports, our Children in Care Council was in a state of transition and was in the process of being re-established when the Pandemic hit. During the Pandemic hit year of 2020/2021, a series of 'cooking with friends' engagement sessions were carried out by the participation service. Excitingly, we were able to relaunch the children in care council 'Our Voice' in the 2nd half of this year with face-to-face meetings. We have a vision to identify a location to launch a care leavers hub to be used for the 'Our Voice' meetings and be the base for general engagement evenings.

Merton's participation service sits within the education department where it is included in the overall youth participation of the council. Merton has several Young Inspectors two of which have been ring fenced for care experienced young people.

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. We have recommissioned Coram Voice to undertake another Bright Spots survey for both the children in care cohort and care experienced young people. The surveys closed on the last day of the reporting year this report covers. The participation rate in the survey was very high which demonstrated the commitment of staff to ensure children get their voice heard. The results of the survey will be used to shape the Corporate Parenting Strategy.

Advocacy and Independent Visiting

Jigsaw4u have been providing advocacy and independent visiting since 2013 as a commissioned service. The contract has recently been extended till 2025.

Jigsaw4u received 60 referrals for advocacy for children in their reviews in 2021/22. This was a slight increase from last year's 39 and above the target of 45. Once a referral is made, an advocate will meet with the child and attend their review until either the young person or social worker informs them that advocacy is no longer required. This rise in referrals shows Merton's growing commitment to ensure children's voices are heard and listened to.

As of 31 March 2022, Jigsaw4u were providing 9 young people with Independent Visitors. There are 2 young people on their waiting list. This is in line with last year when we had 9 young people matched. The commissioned target is 8 matches.

The service supported/advocated on behalf of 35 young people (across the borough not just children in care/care experienced) in making a complaint. Positively, this was above the target of 12. Whilst it may seem counterintuitive to suggest more complaints are positive, in Merton we see our complaints service as another way of ensuring that children and young people are being heard and to ensure that we are providing them with a good service. Some of the matters they supported young people around were issues in a foster placement and subsistence and housing issues for a care experienced young person. Jigsaw4u worked with the service around the formality of response letters and as a result they now report that young people now find our responses are easier to read and understand.

VIII. Conclusion

Despite a major restructure in Children's Social Care, Merton remained focused on achieving good outcomes for our care experienced children and improving services. The workforce was rewarded for their hard work when Ofsted judged our services to be 'Outstanding' during their February inspection. We finished the year achieving an excellent response rate to our Coram Voice commissioned 'Bright Spots' survey which will provide us with an understanding of how children and young people experience our services, which we will use to shape the service moving forward. With an organisational culture that prioritises listening to our services users and making continuous improvement, we will continue to adapt and seek the very best outcomes for our care experienced children and young people.