

Agenda Item 7a

<p>Name of decision-maker COUNCIL</p>	<p>DATE 18 September 2024</p>
<p>REPORT/DECISION TITLE STRATEGIC THEME REPORT: NURTURING CIVIC PRIDE</p>	<p>WARD(S) ALL</p>
<p>CHIEF OFFICER</p> <p>Polly Cziok Executive Director for Innovation and Change</p> <p>Elizabeth Fitzpatrick Interim Executive Director for Children, Lifelong Learning and Families</p>	<p>CABINET/LEAD MEMBER</p> <p>Cllr Eleanor Stringer Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Civic Pride</p> <p>Cllr Sally Kenny Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning</p> <p>Cllr Usama Kaweesa Cabinet Member for Children’s Services</p> <p>Cllr Billy Christie Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services</p>
<p>DECISION CLASSIFICATION Non-Key</p>	<p>IS THE FINAL DECISION ON THE RECOMMENDATIONS IN THIS REPORT TO BE MADE AT THIS MEETING?</p> <p>Yes</p>

1. Recommendations:

A. That the Council note and consider the content of this report.

2. Purpose of Report and Executive Summary

2.1 The Council, at its meeting on the 19th of March 2023, approved ‘Building a Better Merton Together’, the Council Plan for 2023 – 2026, which sets out three strategic priorities for the Council. In accordance with the Council’s Constitution, delivery against these priorities is monitored by the Council. To facilitate this monitoring role, each meeting of the Council receives a report providing an update on performance against specific elements of one of the three strategic priorities.

2.2 Building a Better Merton Together sets out how the Council will deliver its ambition with three strategic priorities that shape and guide delivery:

1. Nurturing Civic Pride
2. Building a sustainable future
3. Creating a borough of sport

2.3 The achievement of these strategic priorities requires extensive engagement with residents, voluntary groups, and businesses, building on partnerships and alliances to reach a common goal.

2.4 This report provides the Council with an opportunity to consider progress against the Nurturing Civic Pride strategic priority, with a particular focus on the following priorities:

- that fantastic educational provision and support gives children the best start and equips residents of all ages with the skills and qualifications to succeed
- that residents across Merton will be supported through the cost-of-living emergency.

2.5 For the selected priorities this report provides:

An overview of the Council’s long-term ambitions relating to the chosen priority.

Progress to date against those ambitions, including any specific decisions made since the Council last met in March 2024 as well as performance against key performance indicators where relevant.

Key deliverables and commitments over the life of the new Council Plan (2023 to 2026) and any identified risks or issues relating to these deliverables and commitments.

3. Links to the Merton Priorities (Borough of Sport/Civic Pride/Sustainable Futures)

3.1 This report relates specifically to the Nurturing Civic Pride strategic priority and in particular the following priorities:

- that fantastic educational provision and support gives children the best start and equips residents of all ages with the skills and qualifications to succeed
- that residents across Merton will be supported through the cost-of-living emergency.

4. Introduction and Background

4.1 This report provides a focus on the Nurturing Civic Pride strategic priority and in particular two priorities that are relevant to children and young people. With regards to ‘fantastic educational provision and support gives children the best start and equips residents of all ages with the skills and qualifications to succeed’ the report provides:

- An overview of the strength of the education offer to children of all ages in the borough.
- An update on progress made in the provision of services to children with Special Educational Needs since the signing of the Safety Valve Agreement with Government in 2022.
- An update on support through Start For Life, giving babies and young children the best start to life through a Family Hub approach
- Detail on how the Council informs and educates children and families on healthy eating and diet, including analysis of the impact of these initiatives.
- Detail on teaching vacancies and teacher turnover in Merton over the last five years.
- Detail on absences from schools in Merton and the extent to which absence patterns have changed since the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Detail on exclusions from Merton schools over the last five years, including the proportion of those exclusions that involve children with an Education, Health and Care Plan.
- Detail on the number of children in Merton who are educated at home, including the proportion who are subject to an Education, Health and Care Plan, and how this has changed over the last five years, with an analysis of the causes of these changes.
- The take up of free school meals for eligible pupils and the value of the Pupil Premium to Merton’s schools.
- Support provided to families with regards to the provision of school uniforms.
- An update on the financial pressures being faced by schools and the advice and assistance provided to schools by the Council.
- An update on the supply and demand for school places.
- An analysis of the condition of school buildings across the borough and how the Council works with schools to ascertain this.

- An update on work undertaken in response to the report of the Self-Harm and Eating Disorders Task Group provided to the Children and Young People’s Overview and Scrutiny Panel in June 2023.
 - An overview of the ‘lifelong learning’ opportunities in Merton
- 4.2 With regards to ‘residents across Merton will be supported through the cost-of-living emergency’ the report provides:
- An analysis of the number of children in Merton living in low-income households and how this has changed over time.
 - An update on the initiatives funded by the Council’s £3million Cost of Living fund.
 - Progress on the development of Family Hubs across the borough.
- 4.3 Taken as a whole, this report stands as evidence of Merton Council’s ongoing and evolving work to address the roots of child poverty and to mitigate the effects on children and families. The Council understands that there is no one size fits all approach to lifting children out of poverty, and that is why it is a focus across so many of our work strands – as together they are able to effectively make a difference to families which are struggling.

Working in the context of data gathered by the Child Poverty Action Group, the majority of the initiatives outlined in this report see the council working closely with the borough’s schools and with its voluntary and community sector. This ensures we can continue to monitor progress against these figures and other data related to child poverty provided by our partners.

Across the UK in the last few years, poverty has increased close to pre-pandemic levels and is still deepening. People can experience poverty for a range of linked reasons. Poverty is dynamic, structural and complex.

Section 4 sets out the work taking place across the council to ensure a good foundation for all children in the borough, from excellent educational provision, to embedding opportunities to be active, and to take part in fun activities over the school holidays. Alongside this, it sets out the challenges there are to laying this good foundation and how the council tackles them, including early intervention as well as ongoing educational provision for young adults.

Section 5 focusses on food poverty and the embedding of healthy eating and diet initiatives for children across a wide range of council services, including a dedicated officer taking forward key food and food poverty workstreams.

Section 6 sets out Merton’s position in the local authority landscape with regard child poverty and the advances it has made compared to neighbouring boroughs. It then outlines the work in the current Cost of Living Strategy Action Plan, due to be refreshed in 2025, that is targeted to children, and how Family Hubs focus on preventing escalation of need and supporting whole family working.

EDUCATION PROVISION

Overview of education provision across the borough for children of all ages

- 4.4 The council has the highest possible aspirations for the provision of education for the borough's children and young people, and for the offer for lifelong learning for residents that have reached adulthood.
- 4.3 It is well evidenced, that the earlier families and their children are supported in early childhood wellbeing, learning and development then the likelihood of improved outcomes is achieved, setting children up to thrive across the life course.
- 4.4 Our approach to early family support and intervention, setting up good foundations for all, is achieved through a range of services and approaches across the statutory, private, voluntary, community, social enterprise and faith sectors.
- 4.5 Securing sufficiency of childcare provision, across a mixed market model is a statutory duty for the LA, and as such we have a key role in developing and supporting our early years childcare and early education market.
- 4.6 In the Early Years, Merton has 201 registered childminders, 133 day nurseries and preschools, and all bar one primary school have nurseries as part of their provision. 97% of the childminders and day nurseries/preschools are currently judged to be good or outstanding by Ofsted. These providers deliver a high volume of free early education and childcare places to approximately 4500 families and from September 2024 will also provide additional funded places for families with children aged 9 months – 5 years.
- 4.8 Merton has 56 maintained schools or academies (44 primaries, nine secondaries and three special schools) and one Pupil Referral Unit. Of the 56 schools, 47 are schools maintained by the Local Authority, and nine are academy schools. This bias towards Local Authority maintained provision is in no small part due to the strength of council support for its schools, and the way that local schools are committed to working together to secure the best provision for Merton's children and young people.
- 4.9 96% of the 57 Merton schools/academies/PRU are currently judged to be good or outstanding. Only two schools, both in the primary phase, are not yet judged to be good. This is above the national average of 92%, and in line with the London average. 67% of Merton's secondary schools are judged to be outstanding – significantly above the national average of 15%, and two out of the borough's three special schools are also judged to be outstanding.
- 4.10 Outcomes for pupils at all points of assessment, and in most key indicators have been above national averages for a number of years. For example, from the most recently published data (2023), in the higher levels of reading and mathematics in KS1 Merton pupils are 4th and 9th in the country respectively.

At KS4 Merton students are ranked 5th in the country for progress between years 7 and 11 (GCSE year) – representing consistently high performance in this indicator since it was introduced.

- 4.11 The London Borough of Merton is also committed to providing high quality and sustainable adult learning to improve the social, economic, health and wellbeing of our residents. This is delivered via a strategic investment approach: commissioning provision to the best providers in the field and by developing sophisticated evidence-based approaches to what we deliver.
- 4.12 The service aims to reduce inequalities across the borough by focussing a significant proportion of its investment on those most socially and / or economically disadvantaged whilst providing a broad range of learning opportunities to develop all our resident's skills.
- 4.13 The service is particularly focussed on supporting more residents into 'Good Work' as defined by the GLA's Skills for Londoners Strategy by delivering courses in key job skills and tracking the progress of learners. New provision is being developed as well to address future employer skills needs such as green skills and digital skills.

Broad and rich curricular and extra curricular offer

- 4.14 Merton schools provide a broad and rich curricular and extra-curricular offer, which goes beyond achievement in the core subjects. This is a key aspect of school provision that is also inspected by Ofsted.
- 4.15 'Mini Musicians' is a two-year programme, which is being funded by Merton Council and delivered by Merton Music Foundation in partnership with Sing Up and will form the basis of a comprehensive research study led by the University of Roehampton.
- 4.16 The programme is aimed at children in the Early Years and Key Stage 1 and launched in ten pilot schools across Merton in January 2024 and will run until July 2025, following pupils up into their new year group as they progress into the new academic year.
- 4.17 Over six hundred and fifty pupils are benefitting from weekly specialist music lessons in groups at school. The current Year 2 cohort are also learning to play the melodica, a type of keyboard instrument, which provides an excellent gateway into broader musicianship and most specifically to learning the piano. They will also be entered for a nationally recognised inclusive music award accredited by Trinity College London later this year. This is the first time a cohort of this size has been entered for these exams.
- 4.18 The national Wraparound Childcare Programme, which is centrally funded by the DfE (revenue and capital) to support all primary schools to deliver after school childcare, is being implemented in Merton. Schools are accessing support and funding to develop and deliver a minimum of 200 new and expanded childcare places (this is the DfE target; our estimate in Merton is

that up to 400 places will be created), including access for children with SEND, over the next two years.

Borough of Sport and schools

- 4.19 Borough of Sport has been designed to benefit all residents across the borough but with a focus on children (5-16 year olds) and older residents (aged 65 and above). The plans also seek to reach out to underserved groups - girls/women, disabled people, black, Asian and other community groups plus the less affluent who are more likely to be inactive and facing health inequalities.
- 4.20 Action has been focused around three missions:
- Everyone in Merton, no matter their background, has the opportunity to be active and access sport and physical activity;
 - Merton will be the natural home of sport in London, and will protect, preserve and grow our sporting heritage; and
 - Merton will have a thriving sports and leisure economy that benefits the local community.

Children & Young People Active Survey

- 4.21 The Sport & Leisure Team have been working closely with Sport England and London Sport to ensure data from the Children & Young People's Active Lives survey is captured and highlights areas of need and priority groups for Merton. Information from this survey will shape priorities for the next financial year. In the academic year 2023/2024 a total of 39 schools (secondary and primary) completed the survey.

Tim Henman Foundation Project

- 4.22 This is a two-year project collaborating with Tim Henman Foundation, Disability Sports Coach and Panathlon Challenge. Delivery will commence in September 2024.
- 4.23 Disability Sports Coach will deliver adapted tennis and multi-sport sessions in all of Merton's SEN schools weekly. A weekend Community Club will be established for young disabled people and their families, allowing a disabled child to participate in physical activity alongside a non-disabled sibling.
- 4.24 Disability Sports Coach have created a pathway which enables participants to become session volunteers and potentially qualified coaches which could lead to employment opportunities.
- 4.25 Panathlon Challenge will coordinate an annual sports days allowing the schools to come together and celebrate sport.

London Broncos Partnership

- 4.26 A successful Partnership with London Broncos has been developed enabling schools to benefit from free tickets to attend home game during the current

season. To date over 8000 free tickets have been used by schools enabling young people to be inspired by top level Rugby League.

- 4.27 In addition, over 3500 Merton young people have benefitted from the Broncos H2O programme which had players and coaches from the team attending primary schools in the borough highlighting the importance of good hydration alongside the benefits of being active.

Educational support for children in care and care leavers

- 4.28 The high-quality support from Merton's Virtual School has been consistently highly rated in recent Ofsted inspections of the Department (which is judged overall as Outstanding by Ofsted). In our most recent ILACs report it was noted that:

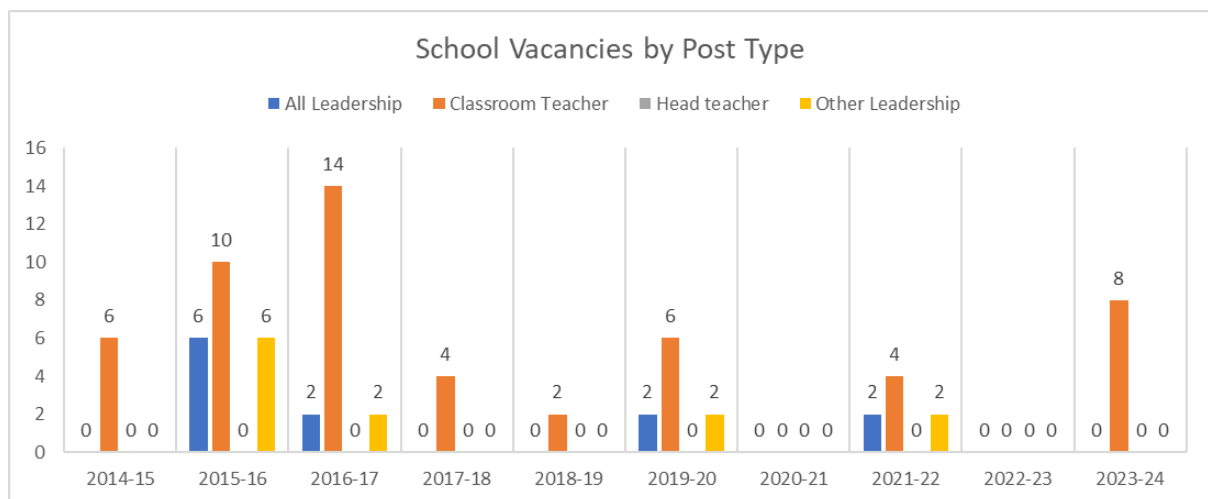
'The work of the virtual school team is excellent. Strong strategic leadership and management oversight by the virtual school headteacher mean that outcomes for children looked after are consistently good. Innovative approaches that enable children to reach their full potential start from a very young 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.'

- 4.29 Led by the Virtual School Headteacher and comprising advisory teachers and support staff, they work with colleagues across Children's Social Care to have the highest possible aspirations for the experiences and outcomes of our children in care and care leavers They have oversight of each young person's education through Personal Education Plans (PEPs). Meetings to review PEPs happen at least one each term either in person or virtually and focus on setting appropriately ambitious educational targets for each child.
- 4.30 The team supports the designated teacher in each school (whether they are placed in Merton schools or outside the borough), the foster carer and social worker in between meetings, to ensure that every Merton care experienced young person has an external champion of their educational progress.
- 4.31 The team provides training for designated teachers of care experienced young people which has included core training, supporting Year 11 into post 16, online safety, understanding speech and language and attachment and developmental trauma.
- 4.32 The team allocates DfE funding (Pupil Premium Grant) to each school attended by a Merton care experienced young person. This is used for activities such as academic, behavioral or therapeutic interventions. The Virtual School retains some funding to pay for services which track attendance every day and additional Educational Psychology and Speech and Language therapy.

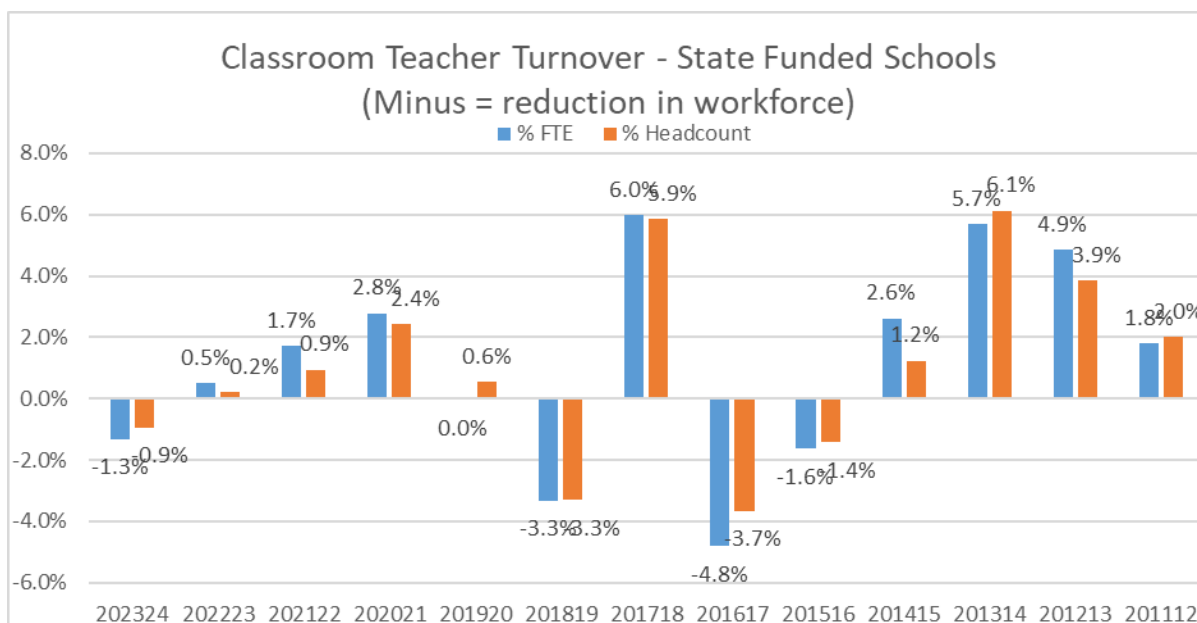
- 4.33 The Virtual School offers support for transitions for previously looked after children; guiding and support their schools, adoptive parents and families with special guardianship orders.
- 4.34 Since 2021, the Virtual School has also kept oversight of the education of children with a social worker (i.e. those deemed requiring a child protection plan or as a child in need). Again, the team track attendance and offer challenge and support where required.

Teaching vacancies and turnover

- 4.35 The number of teacher vacancies in Merton schools is identified through the annual schools’ workforce census, which takes place every November, and is published by the government. Following a spike in vacancies between 2015 and 2017, (which was addressed through a concerted recruitment programme by Merton’s schools’ partnership, Attain), vacancies were very low in Merton schools until just before the pandemic, when there was a total of 10 vacancies. The latest figures show that there were eight classroom teacher vacancies out of a total number of 1480 headcount posts as of November 2023.



- 4.36 The turnover rate for teachers is also calculated through the annual schools’ workforce census. The graph below shows the changes in numbers of teachers, as Full Time Equivalents (FTE) and by Headcount (HC), and the difference from the November in the previous academic year. Between November 2023 and November 2024 there was a decrease in the number of teachers by 1.3% (FTE), the first time there has been a drop in five years.



School Attendance

- 4.37 The highest levels of school attendance continue to be a priority for the council. Merton's vision is that, through close partnership working, more children are supported to regularly attend school. School attendance is essential for the strong development of children and young people and correlates strongly with better progress and attainment, as well as improved safeguarding and better life chances. This strategy is aligned to the new Department for Education guidance on improving attendance.
- 4.38 Before the pandemic, the London Borough of Merton performed strongly with regard to school attendance against our national and regional comparators, and our data shows that we continue to do so. However, like the national picture, Merton's school attendance levels have suffered due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It is our ambition to improve school attendance returning it to pre-pandemic levels.
- 4.39 Good attendance is achieved through:
- high expectations by schools and families of excellent attendance for their children.
 - robust attendance processes in schools to monitor the attendance of children by cohort and individually; to identify the early signs of poor attendance and intervene and support; and to be relentless in their addressing of poor attendance.
 - strong family relationships and resilience so solutions can be found where things go wrong.
 - a good curriculum offer that engages and focuses children academically and socially, and makes them want to attend school; and
 - wide agency and community support to help children and families when they need help.
- 4.40 In comparison with rates immediately after the pandemic, our ambition is to:

- improve attendance for all pupils by at least 2%;
- reduce Persistent Absenteeism (attendance of less than 90%) by 50%;
- keep Severe Absence levels (attendance of less than 50%) at better than London averages;
- improve special school attendance to above London averages.

- 4.41 The pandemic has interrupted children’s patterns of regular attendance. The number of children who miss more that 10% of their schooling has risen significantly across the country as has the number of children with below 50% attendance. Although there has been a drop in attendance rates post pandemic (nationally and internationally), pupil attendance in Merton schools continues to be better than the national and London averages and has improved at a faster rate since the end of the pandemic than the national rate. In particular, in our secondary schools, rates of attendance are almost two percentage points above the national average – a significant difference.
- 4.42 Rates of persistent absence, when pupils are attending for less than 90% of the time, missing approximately one day every two weeks during term time, are again worse than before the pandemic, but also better than the rates seen nationally and locally. These pupils, and particular those whose absence is deemed severe (below 50%) are of the greatest concern and therefore the greatest focus for schools and officers.

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE OF MERTON PUPILS			
2019 (Autumn Term) – pre-pandemic			
	Merton	National	Outer Lond on
Attendance	95.77%	95.07%	95.6%
Persistent Absence (less than 90%)	4.22%	4.93%	4.4%
2022 (Autumn Term) – first year attendance data published post pandemic			
Attendance	93.28%	92.47%	92.99%
Persistent Absence	22.04%	24.19%	23.06%
2023 (Autumn Term) – most recent published data			
Attendance	94.29%	93.31%	94.06%
Persistent Absence	15.89%	19.44%	17.29%

- 4.43 Since the pandemic, Merton officers have completed an assessment of the issues affecting children and young people, and the multi-agency capacity to support the improvement of attendance; created a strategy and a focused action plan to secure improvements; and formed an ‘attendance team’ across services, ensuring that improving attendance is everybody’s business. Merton’s approach was seen as best practice by the Department for Education, and officers were invited to present our approach to other local authorities in a national seminar.

- 4.44 Overseen by the Merton Safeguarding Children’s Partnership and led by the Education Welfare Service, Actions undertaken by the attendance team have included:
- Raising the profile of good attendance through presentations, leaflets and guidance for different stakeholders
 - Support meetings for schools, focusing on the attendance of children who are severely and persistently absent;
 - Support for schools and families from the Social Workers in Schools Team and Early Help Coordinators, as well as other professionals in the Children, Lifelong Learning and Families Directorate;
 - Tracking the attendance of all children with a child in need or child protection plan, as well those of our children in care, through our Virtual School;
 - Providing advice for children with health issues through the specialist nurse in the Education Welfare Service.
- 4.45 Post pandemic, rates of attendance have been affected by anxiety on the part of both children and their parents. Of particular note therefore is:
- The work undertaken to provide guidance for professionals to understand and address Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) which was created very soon after the return to normal schooling after the pandemic, with partners in South West London and St George’s;
 - The support from the Mental Health in Schools teams for children and young people who are affected by EBSA.

Permanent exclusions and suspensions

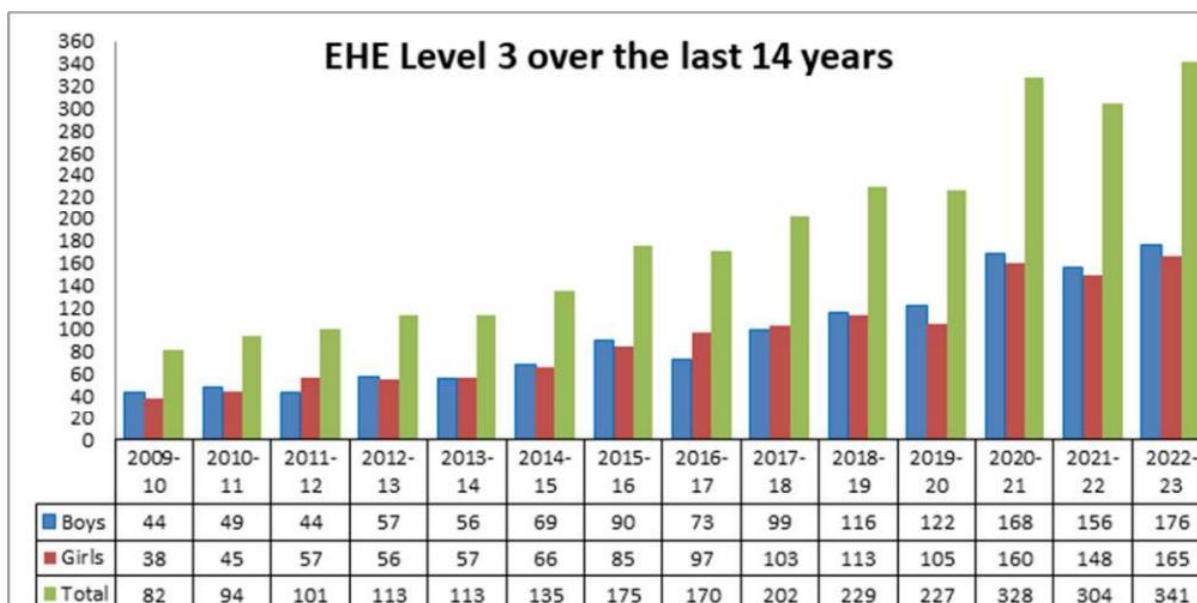
- 4.46 Using the most recently published data, rates of permanent exclusions and suspensions (previously known as fixed term exclusions) dropped off during the pandemic in Merton, as they did nationally. Exclusions remain below pre-pandemic levels, as have suspensions, (to a higher number than pre-pandemic), but all rates remain below the national rates (and for suspensions, significantly below).
- 4.47 There have been no permanent exclusions of a child in a primary school in Merton for many years; in secondary schools, rates have consistently been below the national, and below or in line with the Outer London rates, over the last five published years. Over four of the last five published years, there were no exclusions from our special schools
- 4.48 When a child is permanently excluded, they must have an offer of education and be attending by the 6th day after the exclusion. The local authority is responsible to provide this education. If they are a Merton resident, then they will be educated by Melbury College at the Canterbury Campus (Pupil Referral Unit). Depending in what year they are in will affect the likelihood of a return to another mainstream school or whether they remain at Canterbury Campus to complete year 11 and then progress on post 16.

	Number of suspensions	Rate of suspensions			Number of Exclusions	Rate of Exclusions		
		Merton	National	Outer London		Merton	National	Outer London
2018/19	803	2.8	5.4	3.5	23	0.08	0.09	0.07
2019/20	510	1.8	3.8	2.4	5	0.02	0.06	0.04
2020/21	543	1.9	4.3	2.6	5	0.02	0.04	0.04
2021/22	730	2.6	6.9	4.1	5	0.02	0.08	0.05
2022/23	879	3.1	9.3	4.8	14	0.05	0.11	0.07

- 4.49 The average number of days each suspension lasted for averaged between two and two and a half over the past five years.
- 4.50 Of the 52 pupils who have been permanently excluded from Merton schools over the past five years, fewer than five pupils had an EHCP. There has been no increase since the end of the pandemic for this group of pupils, in the face of a national rise, when the rate of exclusion for pupils with an EHCP rose from 0.07 (237 pupils), in 2020/21, to 0.2 (714 pupils) in 2022/23.
- 4.51 The suspension rate of pupils receiving SEN Support in Merton continued to be very low in 2022/23. In particular, the suspension rate of SEN Support pupils in mainstream secondary schools was 13.9%, which was less than a third of the England average, and the sixth lowest rate in England
- 4.52 Merton schools work very hard to maintain this level of inclusion to ensure that children and young people can access the education they deserve.

Children educated at home

- 4.53 Parents have the right to electively home educate their children. The Education Welfare Service (EWS) and Merton School Improvement track these children to ensure that efficient and suitable education is being provided. Following the steep rise in 2020/21, the numbers being electively home educated dropped slightly in 2021/2 but rose again in 2022/23 and 2023/24. The average for the three years post pandemic is 52% higher than the average for the three years pre pandemic. This rise in the three-year average is higher in the primary phase than in the secondary.



4.54 The parents of a number of these children have chosen home education because there are more online education resources available that were developed during the pandemic. There is also a greater awareness of elective home education, and, combined with the increase in anxiety/ mental health concerns among young people, this has also resulted in higher numbers. A small number of the children have come from independent schools, either following closure, or where, due to financial constraints, families could no longer afford private education.

4.55 Home educating parents are required to provide a report about the education they provide, which is also reviewed. During the pandemic, video/telephone reviews were offered instead of home visits (to accommodate social distancing due to Covid 19), and it was found that some families who had previously chosen to provide reports were willing to have a video review instead, thus increasing contact with those families. We continue to offer video/telephone reviews, but our preference is to have a home visit. For children with a Child in Need or Child Protection plan, a home visit is always planned.

Free school meal provision

PROPORTION OF PUPILS ELIGIBLE FOR FREE SCHOOL MEALS BY SCHOOL PHASE, 2019 -2014					
	2019/2020	2020/2021	2021/2022	2022/2023	2023/2024
Primary	16.6%	21.4%	23.3%	23.5%	23%
Secondary	18.2%	22.3%	24.6%	26.1%	27.9%
Special	42.5%	47.3%	47.8%	49.6%	52.2%

4.56 The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (and for whom schools therefore receive Pupil Premium Grant - PPG) has risen steadily over the past

five years: by 6.4 percentage points in the primary phase, and by 9.7 percentage points in the secondary and special school phases.

- 4.57 These pupils are not just eligible for Free School Meals: schools use their Pupil Premium to enhance the provision for these pupils. Each school reports on their usage of the Pupil Premium on an annual basis, and scrutiny of the strategies they use that are funded by the Pupil Premium is included in all inspection of schools by Ofsted. Merton schools are supported both individually, and as a group (through meetings of Pupil Premium leads) to consider how best this money can be spent.
- 4.58 The latest estimate (June 2024) provided by the DfE identifies that there is £8,792,645 of Pupil Premium funding for pupils attending schools in Merton, (excluding Looked After Children, Service children and those in Hospital Care).
- 4.59 Details of individual families eligible for free school meals and, by extension, pupil premium, are not shared with Local Authorities. For this reason, and due to cross borough movement of children, it is not possible to confirm exactly how many eligible Merton families may not be registered for Free School Meals. However, Merton was one of the first councils to set up a process of automatic enrolling which means this number should be minimal.
- 4.60 Merton schools ask all parents to complete an application for Pupil Premium as part of their induction process. The sign up is voluntary but parents are advised of the benefits to the school and their child should they be found to be eligible. As of the January 2024 census, details were held for approximately 85% of pupils on roll of Merton schools. For families initially found to be 'not eligible', regularly checks are completed. Where a parent's status changes and they become eligible, this information is passed to the school.
- 4.61 By maximising the sign up of families with children attending Merton schools, it is felt that steps are being taken to ensure as many eligible children as possible are being identified. The sign up percentage is checked each year against the January census data to ensure no issues with the process. Since January 2020, the sign up percentage for children attending Merton schools has been above 80%.
- 4.62 Since September 2023, under an initiative from the London Mayor, all primary school children in London are entitled to a free school meal. Up to then the free entitlement was only for Key Stage 1 pupils. This helps ensure that all primary age children can receive a nutritious free school meal and particularly assists families who do not quite meet the threshold of free school meals entitlement.

Holiday, Activities and Food (HAF) Programme – Summer 2024 update

- 4.63 Merton's Summer HAF saw the development many new projects: musical theatre with the Polka Theatre; Sports, Drama, Special Educational Needs (SEN) projects and a drop-in basketball club at Raynes Park, lots of trips out

from many providers, including the Council's own Youth Service. The established providers continued to perform well and most improve their offer each holiday.

- 4.64 The summer holiday was shorter this year which means that the Department for Education allows funded HAF projects to run in the October Half term. This means eligible families (those of free school meals plus 10% nominated by schools and professionals) could enjoy up to 12 sessions rather than the usual 16 over the summer holiday period, and will be offered 4 additional sessions in October, continuing Merton's half-term HAF offer previously funded through the Cost of Living fund. Providers have fed back that offering sessions at half terms in addition to the three main holidays helps families but also keeps the relationship strong with the young people and families which supports stronger attendance.
- 4.65 For Summer 2024, in order to improve our offer to children with special educational needs the Council paid mainstream HAF providers to support greater inclusion and also launched a new specialist SEN HAF programme funded jointly between HAF and the Short Breaks service. Eligibility was originally targeted at pupils in the Council's Additionally Resourced Provisions and Cricket Green Special School but was subsequently extended to all pupils with an Education, Health and Care Plan.
- 4.66 The SEN programme included eight half-days of water sports at Wimbledon Park Lake, nine outdoor whole family adventure days at High Ashurst, sixteen days of SEN sports at Canons and relaxed theatre performances at the Polka. Though well-received, participation rates were variable, and as a result, for future programmes there will be greater engagement with the children and their families to co-design and better publicise the programme of activities. More positively, all those who took part had a very positive experience. Groups led by schools or Local Authority staff did well at High Ashurst and there was very positive feedback from parents about Wimbledon Park Lake.
- 4.67 Parental surveys in our mainstream HAF have been very positive too – 100% agree or strongly agree they had enjoyed the programme and 87% had something positive to say about the food offered. All children felt they had learned something new and/or developed their skills and all agreed it was easy to make new friends.
- 4.68 The Department for Education funding allows us to offer places across the three main holidays in the year. The council Cost of Living funding allowed us to add to this offer by extending the support into half terms.

Support with purchasing school uniform

- 4.69 Schools must follow legal guidance on the cost of school uniforms which includes making sure they are affordable. The cost should never be a barrier to families and pupils applying for and attending a school.
- 4.70 When families are on a low income and need help paying for school uniform there are several places to which the council signposts them.

- 4.71 The first port of call would often be the schools themselves. A number of Merton schools use their Pupil Premium Grant to support families with school uniforms, and the majority run nearly new/second hand uniform sales, often through their parent/carer groups. Some schools also offer school uniform grants.
- 4.72 Parents are also sign posted towards the support from government regarding an interest free budgeting loan, which could help to support the costs of uniforms.
- 4.73 Since January 2024, Wimbledon Guild has helped 30 families with a grant for school uniform. The total grant spend is £5,565, which is an average of £186 per household. This is usually a very quiet period for uniforms and often it may be only a part of the uniform they're asked for, such as a summer dress or PE kit. The applications for uniform normally pick up in August, especially for Reception and Year 7 when full uniform is often needed. For comparison in August and September last year, 22 families were supported with school uniforms. The total grant spend was: £7,825, averaging £350 per family. The raised average is owing to a) full uniforms needed and b) several households with between 5 and 8 school-age children who needed help.
- 4.74 There are a range of voluntary sector organisations in Merton, who provide free school uniforms, school bags, shoes (new) and equipment along with foodbanks that families can access on a drop in and collect basis. Ongoing work to promote and develop partnerships is taking place though our Family Hub approaches and communities of practice.

School budgets

- 4.75 Schools nationally, are continuing to face a series of pressures which are resulting in significant challenges to Governing Bodies in meeting their duty of setting a balanced budget each year. Over recent years, these pressures have included partially funded pay awards, high inflation and significantly increased utility costs, and the need to secure the best provision for children with special needs.
- 4.76 Also as seen nationally and across London, there are falling rolls amongst primary schools. Financial pressures are being particularly felt by some (but not all) schools where there has been a fall in numbers on roll.
- 4.77 The number of schools setting a deficit budget in 2024/25 is lower than the previous year. This reduction has been achieved because of the concerted effort of school leaders to address the issues they are facing, both supported and challenged in this process by council officers.
- 4.78 The council has intensified its support for schools who are experiencing financial challenges over the past two years, recognising the challenges they are facing. This support has included:

- The provision of training for headteachers and for governors about managing budgets. This training has also included an element of peer support.
- Face to face meetings with all schools, both those setting a deficit budget, and those at risk of doing so based on current spending patterns. These meetings are both supportive and challenging, focusing on detailed financial modelling and the broader strategic issues that need to be faced to set a balanced budget.
- The provision of a service level agreement by the council's finance department provides officer support to schools on a regular basis.
- Financial support available is small and based upon a de-delegation of an amount from the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) which is agreed with the Schools' Forum each year. This is allocated to schools who are engaging with the recovery process.

Supply and demand of school places

- 4.79 From the mid-2000s there was a rising demand for primary school places, requiring an extensive and successful expansion programme. However, since around 2016 the position has changed significantly in Merton, in London, and generally throughout the country, in there being a significant fall in demand for primary school places.
- 4.80 Reception year numbers decreased in 2023/24 for the eighth consecutive year and further falls are expected in 2024/25. The 2024/25 roll is expected to be circa 14,650, a drop of 14% compared to the 2017/18 peak of 17,050.
- 4.81 The council is managing the falling demand for school places to ensure that schools can continue to improve and manage a balanced budget. This is largely through the reduction in published admission numbers of schools and use of spare space for other uses such as special needs resourced provisions.
- 4.82 The significantly increased pupil numbers reached secondary age through the 2010s and the Year 7 roll has broadly plateaued to 2023/24 following the significant increase up to September 2018. The lower numbers from primary school are now reaching year 7 and, while the increased popularity of our schools has ensured numbers have kept higher than they would otherwise, we are in discussion with secondary schools in planning to reduce the capacity of some schools.
- 4.83 As with any policy development that affects local government, Council officers explored the possible effects of a potential increase in demand for school places as a result of the new government's change in VAT policy for private schools. It is difficult to know exactly how many children would move to the state sector as a result of this government change in VAT policy, but The Institute for Fiscal Studies has published a paper which provides their best judgment that it would lead to a 3–7% reduction in private school attendance.

- 4.84 Working with these figures, officers have identified that given the number of children attending independent schools is approximately 10% of the resident population, this would be an increase in demand for state schools of circa 0.5% of the school population. Compared to the general changes in demographics described above, with a significant decrease in the child population of many percentages points now reaching secondary age and given the strength of education provision in the borough, the council has no concerns regarding being able to provide sufficient places in Merton's schools, which consistently perform above the national averages in exam results and Ofsted ratings. Therefore, this pre-emptive work has allowed us to provide assurance to our local schools that any additional demand on local school places could be comfortably accommodated.

School buildings condition and maintenance

- 4.85 The council has an annual process to determine capital maintenance works needs, backed up by condition survey data. Every October schools are asked if they have any priorities or concerns that they feel the council should address. There are then periodic visits at the end of the autumn term and early spring term which are then backed up by a qualified surveyor, and the capital condition programme is determined based on need as soon as the government confirms the level of grant, which in recent years has been in early April. This enables the majority of works to be undertaken during the school summer holidays
- 4.86 The council has facilitated the opening up of schools for sport in recent years. Merton schools, with the help council officers and Merton School Sports Partnership, have secured almost £300K (across 22 schools) from the first round of the DfE funding for Opening School Facilities.

School streets

- 4.87 There are currently 29 schools within a school street in Merton, which is the highest number of any local authority in south west London .
- 4.88 A school street is a road that accommodates a school's pedestrian gate whereby motorised access is restricted during the drop-off and pick-up times. Benefits include reduction in congestion, pollution, collisions and risk thereby providing a safer environment within the vicinity of schools.
- 4.89 In general School streets allow and encourage children to safely walk, cycle and scoot to and from school. Reducing motorised journeys and reducing traffic congestion immediately outside schools is important for improving road safety, air quality, and can help toward addressing climate change whilst encouraging a change in behaviour and attitude toward the use of private motorised vehicles and toward sustainable and active modes of travel.

Safety Valve Progress

- 4.90 The Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) is a specific grant for the council to manage in relation to schools. The 'High Needs' block relates to children with Special Educational Needs (SEND) and alternative provision.
- 4.91 From 2018/19 Merton Council started having a deficit on this budget and by the end of 2020/21 this had reached £24.981 million. In autumn 2021 the DfE invited Merton to participate in the second round of their 'Safety Valve' intervention programme with the aim of agreeing a package of reform to the high needs system that will bring the DSG deficit under control, with additional financial contributions from the DfE dependent on the council undertaking these actions
- 4.92 Merton used this as an opportunity to undertake some transformational activity and to seek additional support from government for new specialist school provision. This includes being successful in a bid for government funding for a new special free school, which will be operated by Orchard Hill College Academy Trust (OHCAT). The council has been active in working with government to secure a suitable permanent site for the school and for temporary options to ensure additional places can be provided as quickly as possible.
- 4.93 The broad strategy of Merton's agreed plan, contained in nine conditions, is to 're-balance' the system in the continuum of SEND provision through:
- Promoting inclusive education in our settings and schools, and supporting them to strengthen the support they are able to provide children/pupils with SEND;
 - Providing more state school specialist places within the borough through a mixture of expansion of existing schools and a new Special Free School;
 - Continuing to ensure that our decision making processes for EHCPs are robust, and ensure that pupils who need an EHCP can get one;
 - Strengthening our contracting with independent and non-maintained schools to ensure value for money; and
 - Strengthening the annual review processes for EHCPs.
- 4.94 Merton's latest Safety Valve return submitted on 28th August 2024 shows that we are continuing to substantially meet all the conditions, including the following:
- Whilst pupils who need EHCPs continue to receive that support, the rate of EHCPs has slowed considerably (the number of plans increased by 3.98% in 2023 in comparison with a London average of 9.21%). This rate of increase is below the rate of increase stated in the Council's Safety Valve plan.
 - We have delivered extra specialist school places through the expansion and creation of new Additionally Resourced Provisions, and the plan for a new special free school is progressing.
 - We have worked closely with schools to strengthen their provision for pupils with SEND, including the creation of guidance for what should be

'ordinarily available' for those pupils in our schools.

- We have and continue to robustly challenge independent non-maintained school fees.

4.95 The financial outturn for 2023/24 shows that Merton considerably reduced the gap between High Needs grant and spend (i.e. excluding the safety valve payments) by £3.9 million compared to the previous year. However, there remain significant challenges, as a result of the following:

- Merton's High Needs block funding from the government increased by just 2.06% between 2023/24 to 2024/25.
- This was in the context of significant inflationary pressures being seen by the whole system, and a rise of the number of EHCPs, already noted, of 3.09%.

4.96 Nevertheless, the Department for Education are content with Merton's progress and continue to meet their Safety valve contributions. This is not the case for all Local Authorities in Safety Valve agreements, where activity seems to be seen as less robust, and for whom the DfE will not be providing the Safety Valve contributions and who have been placed on an 'enhanced monitoring programme'.

Merton Adult Learning

4.97 "The London Borough of Merton is committed to providing high quality and sustainable adult learning to improve the social, economic, health and wellbeing of our residents. This is delivered via a strategic investment approach: commissioning provision to the best providers in the field and by developing sophisticated evidence-based approaches to what we deliver."

4.98 Merton Adult Learning is funded through the Adult Skills Fund to provide for Adult Learners who are 19 plus on the day of starting a course. Funding is allocated by the GLA and ESFA through the Adult Skills Fund for 24-25 starting 1st August 2024 to 31st July 2025:

- Adult Core (Qualification courses)
- Tailored Learning (non-qualification courses).
- Free Courses for Jobs (Level 3)

4.99 Merton programmes delivered plays an important role in fostering personal growth, economic development, and social cohesion within the community. In the year 2023-24 funding was the Adult Education Budget (the final year of this funding stream) there were 2146 learners on programmes in Merton, 61.5% were Merton residents, 17.7% had a disability and 33% were male.

4.100 Economic Development:

- Adult learning programmes provide skills and vocational training for example in Early Years, Catering and Health and Social Care, enabling residents to obtain better jobs and contribute to the skilled workforce.

- Courses in CV writing, interview skills, and job search skills prepare learners for the job market, increasing employment rates and economic stability in the community.
- Entrepreneurship: Merton offers Bookkeeping, Accounts and offer learners support in business and entrepreneurship, supporting small business creation and innovation.

4.101 Personal and Professional Growth:

- **Lifelong Learning:** A wide range of courses, from basic literacy and numeracy to advanced certifications, fostering a culture of lifelong learning, encouraging individuals to continually develop their knowledge and skills. Math, English and IT skills are embedded in the curriculum.
- **Career Advancement:** Continuing education and professional development courses help individuals advance in their careers, leading to personal fulfilment and higher earning potential.

4.102 Social Cohesion:

- **Community Engagement:** Adult Learning venues provides opportunities as hubs for community activities and civic engagement bringing people together and fostering a sense of community.
- **Cultural Integration:** Language and cultural programs assist immigrants and refugees in integrating into their new communities, promoting social harmony, and understanding. ESOL programmes include pre-entry level, entry levels and Level 1. Refugees from Ukraine benefited from learning in Merton which helped learners at Pre entry and Entry levels to adjust to life in the UK, they in turn participated and added value to the community. Learners from Ukrainian in two successive years won learner of the year Awards. ESOL learners won Best Learner Award two years in succession.

4.103 Health and Well-being, Access, and Inclusion:

- **Health Literacy:** Educational programmes on health and wellness improve individuals' understanding of health issues, leading to better health outcomes and reduce healthcare costs. Social Prescribing is welcomed and encouraged.
- **Mental Health:** Participation in educational learning activities which help improve mental health by providing a sense of purpose, reducing isolation, and enhancing cognitive function.
- **Merton targets learners who are furthest away and marginalised often those who did not complete formal education, promoting education equity and inclusion. The council has seen increased participation from learners in the most deprived wards.**
- **The service is responsive to learners feedback this influences programming offering flexible scheduling and some online learning, adult learning programs make it possible for learners with different commitments to participate.**

4.104 Adult Learning in Merton specialist partners are funded to provide in Merton, include Richmond Hillcroft Adult Community College provision for SEND learners, South Thames College Group offering a broad range of high-quality training; TEC Training provide training in Personal Track Safety and Transportation that leads to employment, Global Solution Services courses in Employment Skills. Jobcentre Plus provides active referrals to Merton partners. The South London Partnership Hubs collaboration with Merton

targets Green Skills and Health and Social Care job outcomes. The Adult Learning Peer Review Group London provides bench marking and the sharing of best practice and peer reviews. These collaborations and partnerships enable Merton to provide programmes which has seen significant increased demand, residents develop employment skills, gain employment, and contribute to their communities.

- 4.105 Libraries and Community Centres and colleges offer includes GCSEs, Functional skills, digital skills, green skills, ESOL, Leisure skills, Arts, and vocational skills, providing entry points for community members to improve their skills irrespective of their starting point. Learners can achieve their goals and progress to further education, apprenticeships, and employment.

Self-Harm and Eating Disorders Task Group progress update

- 4.106 On the 21st of June 2023, a task group which had reviewed eating disorders and self-harm affecting young people in Merton, reported to the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Panel. This report made 11 recommendations which were later all adopted by Cabinet.

- 4.107 Since the report of that task group:

- Overseen by the CAMHS Partnership Board, a broad range of support for children and young people with mental health difficulties has continued to be provided through the local partnership, at the universal, targeted and specialist levels.
- CAMHS referral rates and waiting times have been regularly scrutinised by the CAMHS Partnership Board.
- Mental Health in Schools Teams have continued to offer targeted support for children and young people, as well as the schools they attend.
- The council has continued to support schools through the Mental Health Leads Forum to consider the range of support for children and young people who self harm and who have eating disorders.
- The Leader has lobbied for social media platforms to address the issues of self harm and eating disorders.
- Guidance for professionals about Emotionally Based School Avoidance is being refreshed, strengthening multi-agency understanding of this condition affecting young people and their attendance at school.
- There has been greater promotion on social media. My Futures and the Participation team have posted links on Instagram to mental health and wellbeing services. We have two websites aimed at young people - Young Merton and Getting It On. Both include information that is searchable on the mental health offer and getting it on runs time limited promotions – such as a recent one on exam stress that offered advice and linked young people to key services.

5. Detail on how the Council informs and educates children and families on healthy eating and diet, including analysis of the impact of these initiatives.

5.1 Healthy eating and diet are built into a wide range of Council services for children and their families. The factors affecting children's healthy eating and diet are broad and complex. Merton's Child Health Weight Action Plan (2022-2025) and Merton's Food Poverty Action Plan (2023-2026) are driving actions to support healthy eating and diet.

5.2 The Child Healthy Weight Action plan has three key themes:

- Making childhood obesity everyone's business
- Supporting children, young people and their families and
- Healthy places

5.3 The plan is routinely monitored through the Healthy Weight Steering Group which meets quarterly. The Food Poverty Action Plan 'seeks to achieve a strong, coordinated and strategic partnership approach to tackling people's inability to afford, or have access to, quality food for a healthy diet'. This plan includes a range of actions which are monitored by the Public Health team through Merton's Food Response Network.

5.4 Both plans recognise that families' ability to act on the advice and support received is affected by their personal factors for example their income, housing, physical environment, access to affordable healthy food. Merton also recognises the link between unhealthy diets and poor dental health. Commissioning of dental and oral health services has recently been devolved to the Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) from NHS England and the SW London dental lead and NHSE dental epidemiologist will be meeting with the SWL Directors of Public Health to discuss the needs and plans for dental health commissioning.

5.5 Some of actions being undertaken as part of the Child Healthy Weight Action Plan and Food Poverty action plan are highlighted below.

Healthy food environment

5.6 No new fast food outlets within 400 metres of schools have been given planning permission in 2024. In recognition that there are existing fast food takeaways within 400m of schools, the Healthier Catering Commitment (HCC) officer (joint role with Richmond and Wandsworth councils) is now focusing efforts on encouraging businesses within 400 metres of schools to sign up to the HCC. The HCC is a scheme for food businesses which supports them to review and take steps to reduce their level of saturated fats, salt and sugar in the foods they sell. Progress was reported back at the July Healthy Weight Steering Group. There have been 10 sign ups so far with the highest number around Harris Wimbledon. The Officer is continuing to work with the premises around schools to increase the sign-ups.

5.7 Sustainable Merton's Community Fridge (part funded from a Merton Cost of Living Grant) has partnered with the National Trust in their community garden which is providing fresh produce to the Morden Community Fridge. The Public

Health team is currently working with the Commonsides Community Development Trust (CCDT), Parks and idverde to upgrade the community growing space behind the New Horizon Centre and provide CCDT and Polish Families Community Fridges with fresh produce to support more individuals and families with children.

- 5.8 In recognition of the importance of the impact of food poverty and healthy eating and diet, the Public Health team successfully bid to the GLA for funding to create a 1-year role - Strategic Lead for Food, Food Partnerships and Cost of Living to take forward key food and food poverty workstreams. The postholder started in role in July 2024.
- 5.9 A successful programme of cook and eat classes was delivered in 2023-2024 which introduced families to cooking affordable healthy food. These classes received very positive feedback from participants. The classes took place in two locations, St. Mark's Church in Mitcham and The New Horizon Centre in Pollards Hill. The classes received very positive feedback from participants and 8 participants from the St. Mark's class received attendance certificates at an end of course celebration in April 2024. The courses were funded through a one off grant and while there are currently no further courses planned, the legacy arrangements have involved giving the equipment to Phipp's Bridge Family Hub and Moat's Healthy Living Centre in Pollard's Hill to enable these venues to deliver their own cook and eat classes. Commonsides Community Development Trust also continues to deliver a weekly cook and eat session.

Start for Life and Early Years

- 5.10 'The Best Start for Life' is a vision for the 1001 critical days, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-best-start-for-life-a-vision-for-the-1001-critical-days> and is an evidenced based approach to providing families with the best start for life across the earliest stages from conception to the age of 2.
- 5.11 In Merton, we are developing and publishing a Start for Life Offer across midwifery, health visiting, infant feeding, mental health, SEND and safeguarding which enables all professionals and families to more easily access and find out about the services available to them.
- 5.12 Supplementing the publication and promotion of local services is the distribution of national promotional campaigns and web.
- 5.13 One of the key components of healthy eating and diet from a young age is encouraging and supporting mothers to continue breastfeeding as long as possible - six months is the WHO recommended optimum duration. Merton's infant feeding service provided by Central London Community Healthcare Trust (CLCH) and commissioned by Merton Public Health is at Level 3 of the UNICEF baby friendly standards and has recently been assessed for the Gold Award (notification pending). Being at Level 3 means that Merton's infant feeding services which includes weaning are at a very high level having been rigorously assessed against the UNICEF standards. This assessment includes extensive feedback from parents. Merton's service includes breastfeeding drop-ins from birth and one to one support. <https://clch.nhs.uk/services/new-baby-and-parent-resources/infant-feeding-services/breast-feeding-merton>

- 5.14 Health visitors are a key professional group in the early years and one of their roles is to use their planned and opportunistic contacts to talk to families about nutrition and physical activity. This is built into the emerging draft service specification (from 2025 onwards) as part of the Healthy Child Programme High Impact Area 4.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/commissioning-of-public-health-services-for-children/early-years-high-impact-area-4-supporting-healthy-weight-and-nutrition>
- 5.15 Childcare providers in Merton are encouraged and supported to sign up to Healthy Early Years London (HEYL). 'In Healthy Early Years settings and at home, children will be supported to eat a healthy lunch and healthy snacks and drink plenty of water, not fizzy drinks'.
<https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/health-and-wellbeing/healthy-early-years-london/about-healthy-early-years-london>
- 5.16 CLCH who are the health visiting and school nursing provider, supported by staff from within Merton's Children's Centres, have recently piloted an early years' version (2-4years of age) of their Family Start programme which is offered to children and their families following National Child measurement Programme (NCMP) assessments at Reception and Year 6 and who are in the 'obese' category. Feedback from the families who attended the Early Years pilot can be seen below. Public Health are currently working with CLCH on potential options for this pilot going forward.
- 5.17 The Family Start programme incorporates discussions around different food groups: The Eatwell Guide, portion sizes, regular meals, snack swaps, healthy lunch boxes, physical activity. The recent annual report for 2023-2024 stated 100% of participants reported their knowledge and behaviour around food had improved following completion of the programme.
- 5.18 Staff working in Children's Centres delivery across our under 5s activity programmes, promote and deliver a range of initiatives including the collection of vitamins and food vouchers for eligible families, oral health promotion, healthy eating and healthy activities, and access to large outdoor play areas that promote physical exercise and access to the natural environment. Staff are trained in delivering information on "eat well", UNICEF baby friendly breastfeeding support and healthy child development.

Schools

- 5.19 Merton is fortunate that the majority of its primary schools are signed up to the Merton Council commissioned catering provider, who are contractually committed to delivering food which meets the School Food Standards.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-food-standards-resources-for-schools>. CLLF regularly monitor compliance with this requirement with support from Public Health.
- 5.20 Merton has a longstanding partnership with Kings College University to provide placements for its dietitian students. Two of the proposed projects for September 2024 are to advise on the evidence for secondary school catering and food standards to inform the new specification and to advise on the nutritional content of the food relief offer.

- 5.21 In addition, all Merton Primary schools are signed up to the water only schools initiative and the Merton School's Sport's Partnership (MSSP) which leads on water only schools as part of the Healthy School's London work (and is commissioned by Public Health), recently met with Secondary School Heads to discuss how to implement the secondary schools toolkit. Two local schools offered to be part of a pilot.
- 5.22 National Child Measurement Programme data (NCMP). The data from the NCMP programme which weighs and measures the height of children in reception and Year 6 can be used to measure the potential impact of all these programmes described above, but over time. As obesity is complex, it will be difficult to attribute one single action/programme to any overall population reduction in obesity rates, however it is a combination of actions taken across the whole system, that will bring about any change. For example, the work being delivered as part of Borough of Sport activities if successful, will not contribute to the impact on obesity rates in children for a number of years. We therefore must use proxy measures such as participation rates in evidence programmes in combination with other data to indicate estimated potential impact over time.

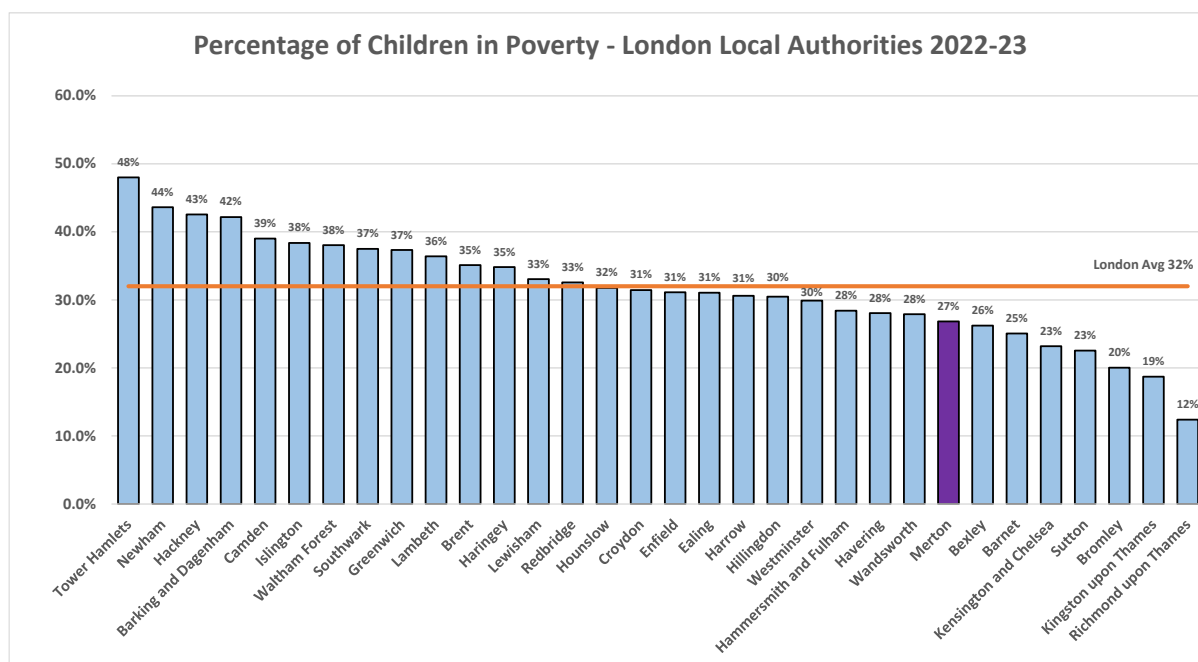
6. COST OF LIVING

Children in low-income households

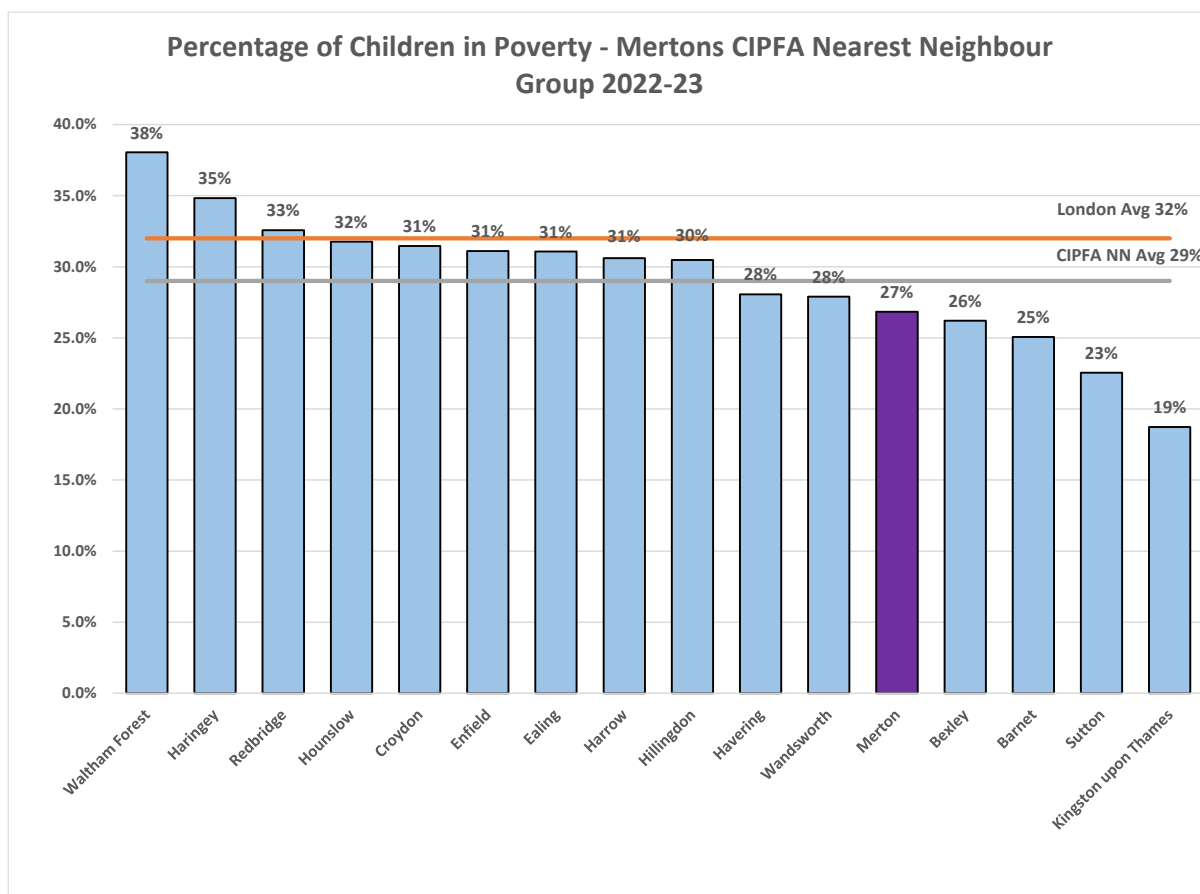
- 6.1 The new Labour government has recently extended the Child Maintenance consultation, launched under the previous Conservative government, which seeks to consider how the Child Maintenance Service can support efforts to increase the number of children kept out of poverty. The proposals out for consultation are as follows:
- Stopping the Direct Pay service and deal with all cases via Collect and Pay
 - Exploring the best way to support family-based arrangements with an enhanced calculation tool, as well as conflict resolution support.
 - Seeking views on how the CMS can better support victims of domestic or economic abuse.
- 6.2 In addition to this, the government has also convened a ministerial taskforce to commence work on a Child Poverty Strategy, with a new Child Poverty Unit also established in the Cabinet Office. The development of this strategy is in the early stages and so far, meetings with key third sector organisations have not taken place. Engagement with relevant organisations is expected to take place in due course and the council will seek to ensure that it is a part of any discussion relevant to local authorities.
- 6.3 The latest information on Child Poverty across the UK applies to the year 2022/23 and was released by the University's Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRSP), in June 2024.
- 6.4 For the most current year available, 2022/23, Merton's children living in relative poverty rate is 27%, the 8th lowest in London (out of 32 London

boroughs, not including the City of London). This equates to just over 14,000 children in the borough classed as living in poverty during 2022/23.

- 6.5 Of all London Councils Richmond upon Thames has the lowest rate at 12% and Tower Hamlets the highest at 48%.



- 6.6 Of our most similar local authorities, according to the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) Nearest Neighbours model, we are ranked as the having the 5th lowest child poverty rate out of 16 councils, with Kingston Upon Thames, Sutton, Barnet and Bexley having a rate lower than our 27%. Waltham Forest has the highest rate of our near neighbours at 38%.

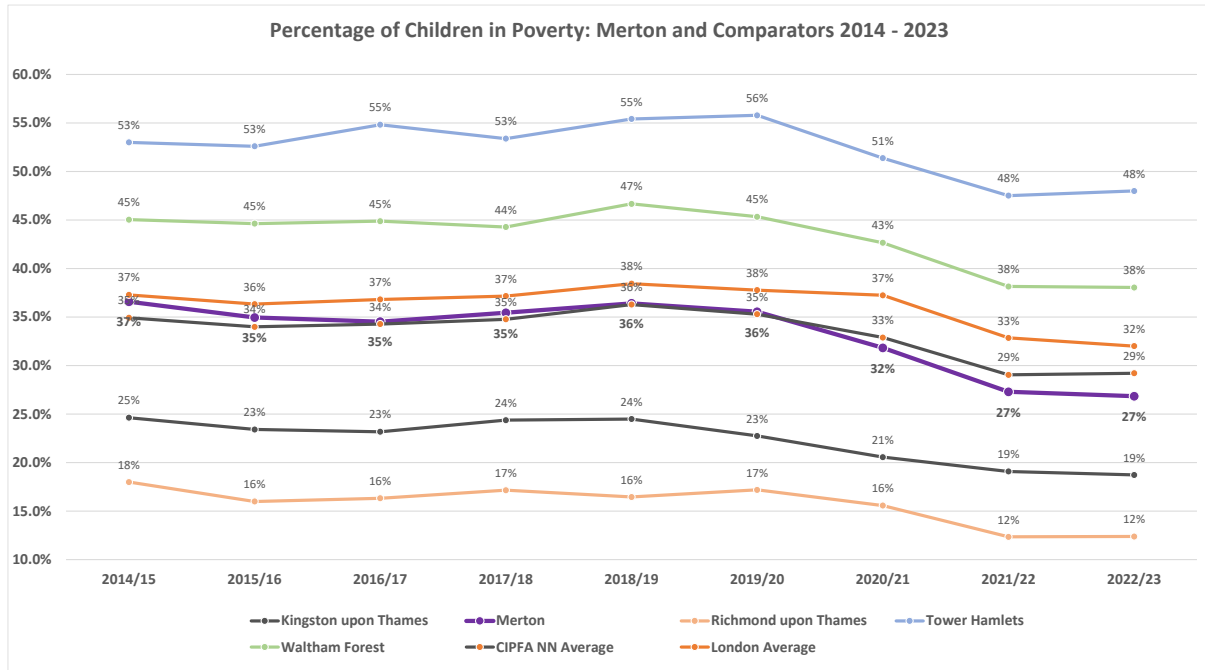


6.7 However, looking at the nearest geographical neighbouring boroughs, we can see in the below tables below that Merton has seen a greater reduction in children in poverty numbers compared to Kingston and Sutton. Compared to 2014/15, by 2022/23 Merton's children in poverty rate had declined by 9.7 percentage points compared to Sutton's 7.4 percentage points and Kingston upon Thames' 5.9 percentage points. Over the nine year period, a greater number of children have been lifted out of poverty compared to Sutton and Kingston.

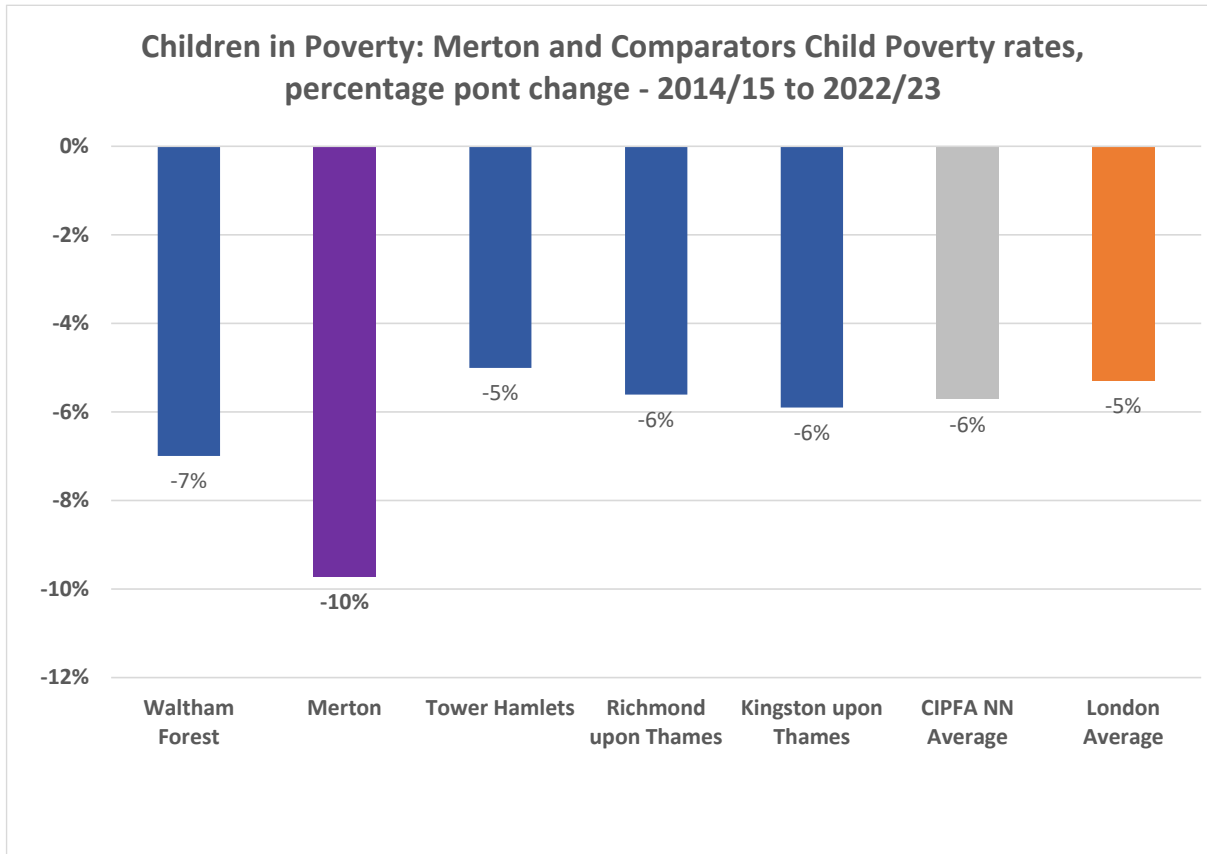
Local authority	Percentage		Percentage point change
	2014/15	2022-23	
Merton	36.6%	26.8%	-9.7%
Sutton	30.0%	22.5%	-7.4%
Kingston upon Thames	24.6%	18.7%	-5.9%

Local authority	Number		Actual number change
	2014/15	2022-23	
Merton	16493	14147	2346
Sutton	13497	11855	1642
Kingston upon Thames	9210	7512	1698

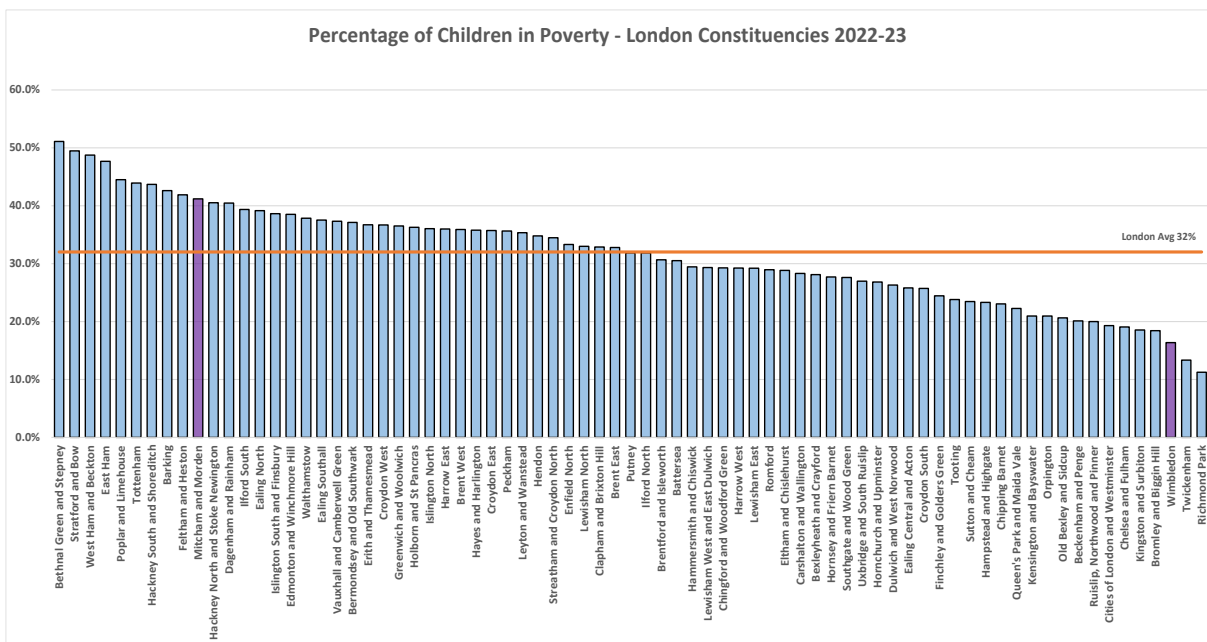
6.8 Loughborough University’s Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRSP) has rates of child poverty information available from 2014/15. The following chart illustrates Merton Councils rate of children living in poverty over the last 9 years compared to the London average, Richmond upon Thames, Kingston upon Thames, Tower Hamlets and Waltham Forest.



6.9 Since 2014/15, the rate of Merton children living in poverty has declined by 10% from 37%. This equates to approximately 2,300 less children living in poverty since 2014/15. The chart below illustrates how Merton’s rate of Child poverty has decreased more than selected comparator local authorities, including by double the London average and almost double our Nearest Neighbour average.



6.10 As a borough, Merton’s child poverty rate is the 8th lowest in London. In terms of London’s 75 constituencies, Wimbledon has the 3rd lowest rate of children living in relative poverty at 16%. However, Mitcham and Morden have the 10th highest rate at 41% (equating to just under 12,000 children), in 2022/23.



6.11 Below is a table of the ten London constituencies with the highest rates of children living in poverty in 2022/23.

Constituency	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Bethnal Green and Stepney	57%	56%	59%	57%	60%	58%	55%	49%	51%
Stratford and Bow	52%	52%	53%	52%	55%	53%	51%	48%	49%
West Ham and Beckton	50%	50%	51%	50%	52%	51%	49%	47%	49%
East Ham	48%	49%	50%	49%	52%	50%	50%	47%	48%
Poplar and Limehouse	50%	49%	50%	50%	53%	51%	47%	43%	44%
Tottenham	47%	45%	46%	48%	49%	47%	44%	43%	44%
Hackney South and Shoreditch	47%	46%	48%	49%	50%	55%	49%	45%	44%
Barking	46%	47%	47%	47%	50%	49%	49%	43%	43%
Feltham and Heston	39%	40%	41%	42%	45%	44%	42%	41%	42%
Mitcham and Morden	43%	42%	42%	43%	45%	44%	41%	41%	41%

6.12 In 2014/15, Mitcham and Morden had the 16th highest relative child poverty rate in London. The following constituencies had higher rates of children living in poverty than Mitcham and Morden at that time, but in 2022/23 have lower child poverty rates: Bermondsey and Old Southwark; Peckham; Vauxhall and Camberwell Green; Walthamstow; Greenwich and Woolwich; Holborn and St Pancras; Ilford South, and Leyton and Wanstead.

6.13 Below are updates on specific Cost of Living funded activities that are targeted at addressing child poverty. These include the extension of the current Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme to half terms, the continuation of borough-wide cost of living events for all residents, including a recent targeted event for families, as well as the launch of a new Merton Young Saver Scheme to encourage good saving habits among secondary school pupils. In addition, there is also broader cost of living support that families can access, including a new pilot Merton Cost of Living (CoL) Service, delivered by Citizens Advice. Outside of the core cost of living programme, there is also wider support for Merton families experiencing financial hardship. This includes vouchers being issued to families in receipt of free school meals towards the cost of food during school holidays, plus an application-based grant scheme for residents in financial hardship, to help with costs such as the purchase of school uniforms. Both are funded through the Household Support Fund.

Cost of Living Fund update

6.14 A Merton Council Cost of Living Strategy and Action Plan 2023-25 – a cross-council boroughwide approach to supporting residents in Merton – was agreed by Cabinet on 20 March 2023.

6.15 In addition, a £2million Cost-of-Living Support Fund was agreed by Cabinet in September 2022, as well as allocations for the first £1 million. Allocations for the second £1 million were agreed by Cabinet in March 2023.

- 6.16 In November 2023 Cabinet agreed to further expand the Merton Council Cost of Living Fund by allocating an additional £1million, to be funded from the Strategic Priorities Fund, in recognition of the ongoing challenges faced by local residents and businesses as a consequence of the cost-of-living emergency.
- 6.17 Work is currently underway to provide an update on the latest spending to date across all three tranches of the Cost of Living Fund and will be reported to a public meeting at a future point.
- 6.18 Below are updates on specific Cost of Living funded activities which address issues of child poverty.

Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme:

- 6.19 Merton is just one of a handful of local authorities in the country that has made a commitment to extending HAF programme provision to half terms in addition to the summer, Christmas, and Easter holidays. Merton's HAF Programme gives children and young people opportunities to enjoy physical exercise, arts and cultural activities, healthy food, trips out and other activities. HAF Holiday Clubs are free for children and young people between five and 15 years old and who are eligible for benefits-related Free School Meals. An allocation of £200,000 in funding from Tranche 2 of the council's Cost of Living Support Fund has enabled HAF programme provision to be extended to half term holidays from May 2023 to May 2024. In the first full half-term funded through the Cost of Living fund, October saw over 1,200 pupils attend over 3,500 sessions in 26 projects across Merton.
- 6.20 The extended HAF programme reached a large number of pupils on Free School Meal and other vulnerable categories, specifically: children with a social worker or family support worker; young carers; refugees and asylum seekers, including Ukrainians; siblings of children on Free School Meals; and children which the school considers are facing exceptionally challenging circumstances. Six groups of secondary pupils with poor school engagement have been taken on outdoor adventure trips, with additional financial support from Clarion Housing.
- 6.21 The half-term projects have enabled continuity for providers, parents and schools and there has been steadily growing demand throughout the year. It has been noted that take up has been slightly stronger than main holidays, even in February, and with better attendance levels.
- 6.22 Merton is awaiting further government announcements on the continuation of the government-funded core HAF offer beyond March 2025.

Cost of Living events:

- 6.23 The council has run a series of 16 cost of living events in Merton's libraries and the Civic Centre during the latter half of 2022 and throughout 2023 and 2024 to date, with three further events planned for this year. These have offered an effective mechanism for signposting people, including those who are digitally excluded to the right information, advice and support around the

cost of living. The events have been attended by more than 3,400 residents in total since their inception and have consistently received positive feedback from residents. These events have taken place in Colliers Wood Library, Mitcham Library, Merton Civic Centre, Pollards Hill Library and Raynes Park Library, all of which have sufficient space for holding events of this type as well as being accessible and with good public transport links. Feedback gathered at the events has indicated that residents travel from across the borough to attend, indicating further reach.

- 6.24 The recent event at the Acacia Family Centre and Adventure Playground was a dedicated Merton Family Hub event targeted at families, as the cost of living is one of the top issues that families have identified. The event was attended by 88 residents and was staggered with an Adventure Playground open family session, to attract as many families as possible. As well as attendance from a Merton’s regular cost of living event stallholders such as Citizens Advice, this event was also attended by other partners including Wimbledon Foodbank/Growbaby, Health Visiting, School Nursing, Funded Childcare and the Family Information Support Hub (FISH). In addition, Jobcentre Plus ran dedicated Childcare Information Sessions. Key to promoting cost of living/ financial inclusion is support for families to move towards employment and sustaining employment which includes access to childcare and free early education. Through the Family Hub approach and our partnership working with the Department for Work and Pensions, there will be presence at our Family Hubs of our Supporting Families Employment Advisor and staff from our childcare and early education team, advising with regard to pathways to employment, better off calculations and access to the free entitlement, eligibility to various funded provisions and local childcare services.

Citizens Advice Merton and Lambeth (CAML) Merton Cost of Living Service

- 6.25 CAML were allocated funding of £200,000 as part of tranche 1 of the Cost of Living Support Fund to extend their outreach advice offer. A new pilot CAML Merton Cost of Living (CoL) Service has been set up. This provides a provides a mix of open drop-in sessions and pre-booked appointments for Merton residents affected by the Cost of Living crisis, at Colliers Wood Library, Wide Way Medical Centre, Wimbledon Library and Pollards Hill Library.
- 6.26 In the period January 2023 to June 2024, CAML Merton Cost of Living advisers supported 1,299 Merton based individuals with 4,000 advice issues. The top three advice issues were benefits, debt and housing. The recorded financial outcomes (additional benefits claimed) for the period were £213,694. Meanwhile, the equivalent financial outcomes for July and August this year were £145,176, so we can expect a higher outcome for the remainder of the year.
- 6.27 The following chart indicates the ward locations of clients using this service for the most recent six-month period January 2024 to June 2024.

<u>Clients supported by Local Authority Ward</u>	
Longthornton	11%
Pollards Hill	11%

Cricket Green	10%
Abbey	9%
Colliers Wood	9%
Lower Morden	6%
St. Helier	6%
Hillside	5%
Lavender Fields	5%
Figge's Marsh	4%
Village	4%
Raynes Park	3%
Wimbledon Park	3%
Cannon Hill	2%
Graveney	2%
Merton Park	2%
Ravensbury	2%
West Barnes	2%
Wimbledon Town & Dundonald	2%
Wandle	2%

Merton Young Saver Account:

- 6.28 Part of the second tranche of funding included the proposal to develop a pilot for a savings account for young people in Merton, working in partnership with CroydonPlus, the Credit Union for Merton, Sutton and Croydon. This was allocated £50,000.
- 6.29 The pilot Merton Young Savers (MYS) scheme was launched in October 2023 and was targeted at all Year 7 starters in September 2023 who are resident in Merton.
- 6.30 The MYS accounts are to encourage young people to build good savings habits from a young age, go through the process of opening and maintaining an account, get knowledge about managing finances, and understand the value of money management, so that the cost-of-living does not define their futures.
- 6.31 Once a Merton Young Saver Account is open, Merton Council deposits £20 into the students account, along with an additional £10 for their parent or carer.
- 6.32 As of 10 June, a total of 256 adult and junior accounts had been processed or and/or qualify for the scheme. Of these, 136 accounts are open and credited.
- 6.33 In the recent £1million expansion to the Cost of Living Support Fund agreed by Cabinet on 16th November 2023, a provisional £50,000 allocation was made to extend the pilot scheme into the next school year 2024/25. Under delegated authority the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services subsequently signed off the delivery plan and agreed the financial allocation for this element of the fund. The scheme is due to be launched for next Year 7 cohort in September 2024, once funding arrangements are finalised.

Developing a Family Hub approach

- 6.34 In 2022, Merton was successful in securing grant funding to develop a Family Hub model approach across our family and early help system. Over the last 18 months significant work has taken place across the themes of
- access to services;
 - connectivity across a range of services and leadership;
 - relationship based practice.
- 6.35 Family Hubs aim to bring together, through coordinated and impactful approaches, a 24 service offer, as specified in the national Family Hub framework. The approach aims to support the coordination of the delivery of services through a more streamlined and aligned offer to meet family needs including mental and physical health and wellbeing, family support, financial inclusion, parenting, access to childcare, housing and support for SEND for example. The development of the Family Hub programme in Merton is key to delivering an early help offer of support that is local and easy to access, preventing escalation of need and supporting whole family working.
- 6.36 Our key successes include:
- Publication of the Family Hub and Start for Life service directories;
 - Improving physical environments in our designated main Family Hub sites, including a capital refurbishment programme at Phipps Bridge Family Hub and Youth Centre;
 - Setting up Merton Family Voice (service user feedback and consultation group);
 - Co-location strategy and partnership agreement, including quality standards;
 - Co-produced values and principles that underpin Merton's Family Hub approach;
 - Co-produced logo and branding;
 - Development of Merton's Family Hub webpages;
 - Production and delivery of 24 of Lunch and Learn sessions (upskilling workforce across the wide and rich Merton offer);
 - Workforce development action plan;
 - Setting up localised Communities of Practice;
 - Securing additional funding to deliver Parenting Evidenced Based Leadership.

7. Available Options & Preferred Option

- 7.1 This report is for noting and discussing only, so alternative options are not being presented.

8. Reasons for Recommendations

- 8.1 This report is for noting only.

9. Consultation Results

9.1 Prior to the Council Plan 2023 to 2026 being developed extensive engagement with residents, businesses, the voluntary and community sector and key partners was undertaken. Where relevant, consultation relating specifically to the subject of this report is referenced in the body of the report.

10. Next Steps & Timetable: Communication and Implementation of the Decision

10.1 This report is for noting only.

11. Report Appendices

11.1 The following documents are to be published with and form part of the report:

- None

10. Background Papers

11. Cross-Cutting Issues and Implications and Sign-Off

Issue	Implications	Sign-off
Legal including Human Rights Act	This report has been prepared as required by part 4A, paragraph 2.3 (g) of the Constitution and there are no detailed legal implications arising out of the report.	Fabiola Hickson Head of Legal, Procurement and Information Governance 05/09/2024
Finance and other resources	The cost implications for the initiatives outlined in this report are covered within the current MTFs. Any further spending required beyond existing budgets will be reported to Cabinet.	Ellis Kelly Head of Accountancy 05/09/24
Equalities	This report is for noting only and does not introduce any new matters that need to be tested for relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. Any potential equality impact on end users arising from individual initiatives referenced in this report have been, or will be, subject to an assessment of their impact.	Keith Burns Director of Policy, Strategy and Innovation 04.09.24

Climate change	This report is for noting only and does not introduce any new matters that need to be tested for their impact on climate change. Any potential climate impacts arising from individual initiatives referenced in this report have been, or will be, subject to an assessment of their climate impact.	Keith Burns Director of Policy, Strategy and Innovation 04.09.24
Community safety	This report is for noting only and does not introduce any new matters that need to be tested for their impact in relation to community safety. Any potential community safety impacts arising from individual initiatives referenced in this report have been, or will be, subject to an assessment of their impact.	Keith Burns Director of Policy, Strategy and Innovation 04.09.24
Executive Director		Asad Mushtaq, Executive Director Finance & Digital 10.09.24
Cabinet Member/s		Councillor Ross Garrod, Leader of the Council 09.09.24
REPORT AUTHOR: Keith Burns, Director of Policy, Strategy and Innovation		
Tel No. 07768 596946 Email. keith.burns@merton.gov.uk		

This page is intentionally left blank