

Securing Sufficient Accommodation for Children in Care and Care-Experienced Young People

2022

London Borough of Merton

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1. Introduction

The London Borough of Merton is the Corporate Parent for the children and young people that are placed in our care by means of care orders, voluntary accommodation or remand. This strategy is aligned with the Council's [Corporate Parenting Strategy](#). This strategy includes data from 2020-21.

The term *Corporate Parent* simply means that Merton shares all the ambitions for children in our care as any good parent will have for their own children and commits the resources and efforts of the council to achieving the very best outcomes that can be achieved for each child. Being a good Corporate Parent requires a whole systems approach across the council, including its elected members and employees, in partnership with education, health, police, other agencies and individuals with responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of children in care.

The delivery of services to children and young people in care requires procedures, processes and systems to ensure that their needs are met to a high standard, but alongside this organisational activity, and underpinning this activity, the Corporate Parent must demonstrate to each child in its care that they are loved and cherished. Merton aspires to nothing less, and requires this standard of Corporate Parenting from every member and employee of the council.

We have the highest ambitions for all our children and young people and judge our success by a range of criteria including:

- Improving outcomes and closing gaps, particularly for vulnerable children and young people.
- Providing or commissioning services or settings which are independently judged good or outstanding.
- Demonstrating that the views and ambitions of children and young people have informed and improved our service offer.
- Strengthening our work with children and families in need to prevent an escalation of need and risk.

In Merton, we believe that all children should grow up and achieve within their own families and networks when it is in their best interests and is safe enough for them to do so. Our **Values** underpin how we will work together as a partnership and, in Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion, how we make decisions and practice social work alongside our children and families:

- We keep children and young people at the heart of our work;
- We work together to achieve the best for our children, young people, and families;
- We 'Think Family';
- We are committed to doing what we say we will do;
- We work together to achieve the best for children, young people, and their families;
- We learn from what we do to improve the experiences of children, young people, and families; and
- We celebrate difference.

Accommodating children and young people in the type and range of placements that are best suited to their current and on-going needs is crucial to helping children to achieve improved outcomes and to shaping their adult lives and opportunities. This document sets out the Merton approach to securing the types and sufficiency of placements that are needed now and in the coming year. The strategy is informed by needs analysis, good practice and experience to date. It provides a framework for the activity required to obtain high quality placements for our children and young people. This Sufficiency Strategy is not a stand-alone document, but shares the purposes, objectives, and actions, of the following cross-cutting plans:

- the [Merton Children and Young People's Plan](#),
- the [Corporate Parenting Strategy](#),

This Sufficiency Strategy should be read in conjunction with these documents. The Sufficiency Strategy is also informed by the Children's Social Care Self-Evaluation which is updated regularly.

This strategy reflects Merton's leadership and commitment to managing the complexities of the placements economy in South London to achieve sufficiency and quality of placements for the children in our care, ensuring that all placements are in line with values that underpin Merton's approach.

2. Achievements

Below are some of the many achievements to celebrate in the performance of the council in regards to the care of its children in care and care experienced young people.

- The integrated Family Wellbeing Service went live in February 2020. For the first time we introduced a unified assessment process which has strengthened our collective understanding of existing thresholds across the partnership to ensure children access the right level of support.
- We invested in the Mockingbird Family Model (fostering programme) and successfully launched our first 'constellation' in 2021.
- We have extended the Shared Lives service to care experienced young people.
- Following our involvement in regionalisation of adoption, we have embedded our practice of working alongside Adopt London South (South London's regional adoption agency).
- We have invested in the London Care Alliance to help source the best value Independent Fostering Agencies and Residential Placements for our children.
- As part of our commitment to the pan-London agreement, we continue to provide safe accommodation for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children
- We have successfully reignited our Children in Care Council called *Our Voice*.
- The fostering service performs well and aspires to placing more children, especially older children, with its own foster carers and being less reliant on the independent agency fostering sector. This approach is designed to enable children in residential

children's homes to transition to fostering placements, or to return home to their families, whenever safe and appropriate. This requires a continuous focus on the recruitment and retention of our own foster carers.

3. Policy Context

3.1 Sufficiency Duty

The Sufficiency Strategy sets out Merton's strategic approach to securing sufficient accommodation to meet the needs of our children in care. The council has a duty, as stated in section 22G of the Children Act 1989, *'to take steps to secure, as far as reasonably practicable sufficient accommodation for looked after children within their local authority area'*. The 2010 guidance on the 'sufficiency duty' states that local authorities should have embedded plans, as part of their commissioning processes and through partnership working, to meet the duty.

The sufficiency duty must take account of the requirement, under section 22C (5) of the Children Act 1989, that the overriding consideration for placing a child is that the placement must be the most appropriate available to meet the child's needs. Next, preference must be given to a placement with a friend, relative or other person connected with the child and who is a local authority foster carer. Failing that, a placement must be found, as far as is reasonably practicable, in all circumstances, that:

- Is near the child's home;
- Is within the local authority's area, unless that is not reasonably practicable;
- Enables the child to live with an accommodated sibling;
- Where the child is disabled, is suitable to meet the needs of that child; and
- Does not disrupt his / her education or training.

3.2 Strategic Priorities and Pledge for Merton's Children in Care, and Care Experienced Young People

Following a comprehensive consultation exercise in 2018 and the development of the Corporate Parenting Strategy 2019 – 2022 and our Children and Young People's Plan (2019 - 2023), we have simplified our pledges to children in care and care experienced young people and aligned them with the outcomes our young residents and Young Inspectors developed for all children and young people in Merton. These are outlined in the table below. This alignment underpins our commitment to achieve the same outcomes for children in our care or with care experience as their Merton peers.

Our Pledge to Children in Care and our Care Experienced Young People:

Corporate Parenting Pledge	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.	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.	Becoming independent.

3.3 Equalities

Under the Equalities Duty 2010, all local authorities have a statutory duty to consider and mitigate any potential negative impact of services, policies, and procedures on people with 'protected characteristics'. The Sufficiency Strategy includes analysis of data segmented by gender, disability, ethnicity and age as an impact assessment for these groups.

3.4 User Voice

This Sufficiency Strategy includes an overview of the user voice activity, undertaken by the Children, Schools and Families Department, with children in care and care experienced young people, and how 'user voice' has contributed to and informed service developments and delivery.

Our 'user voice' work is in line with the requirements of the Children Act 1989 and 2004 which recognises children as citizens with the right to be heard. We take this to mean that children's wishes and feelings should be ascertained and used to inform decision-making. It also reflects the Children and Families Act 2014, section 19, which requires that children, young people and families should be involved in decision making at every level. In doing so, it also meets the requirements of the new corporate parenting principles¹ which state that in the provision of services for children in care and care experienced young people their views, wishes and feelings should be taken into account.

We commission advocacy services and independent visitors via Jigsaw4u, a local voluntary organisation. Jigsaw4u helps children and young people between the ages of 10 to 21 years old; this includes supporting children and young people to attend and participate in child protection conferences and review meetings; to raise complaints and to prepare for independence. During a period in which we have been striving to make necessary improvements to our children in care council, our commissioned service Jigsaw4U has played an important role in capturing the voices of children in our care.

¹ [Applying corporate parenting principles to looked-after children and care leavers - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)

In March 2018, we were able to commission the Coram Bright Spots Research team to inform the priorities of the *Care Leavers Strategy* (which has recently been combined with the *Children in Care Strategy* to make a combined *Corporate Parenting Strategy*). 68 young people responded to the survey, from a care leaver population of 153: a return rate of 44%. Two-thirds were aged between 18-20 years old. 62% were from Black, Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. We have currently recommissioned Bright Spots to undertake a follow up survey to inform future planning.

The key themes were as follows:

- Young people were predominantly satisfied with their leaving care worker.
- Two thirds (68%) had kept the same worker during the previous 12 months.
- Most young people had a good understanding of why they had been in care. 41% of care leavers were living in rented accommodation (flat or house).
- Just over a third (35%) were in supported accommodation and 12% were living with foster carers, although 34% felt that their accommodation was not right for them.
- 31% of the young people did not always feel safe at home, and 40% did not always feel settled
- Care leavers were more than twice as likely to be finding things 'quite' or 'very' difficult financially, compared to 18-24 year olds in the general population (16% vs. 7%).
- 12% of care leavers had 'always' or 'often' felt lonely in the previous few weeks – similar to the proportion reported by peers (10%) in the general population
- We have recommissioned Bright Spots to undertake a follow up survey which is currently underway and once complete, will inform future strategies and service developments.

4. Values Approach to Placement Commissioning

There are 32 boroughs in London recruiting foster carers and placing children with independent fostering agencies. In addition, some local authorities from other parts of England also place children in London, so that the local 'economy' of placements presents complex challenges to sufficiency. Merton also aspires to enable care experienced young people to transition to independent living in the range and types of accommodation best suited to their needs; this is a challenge in the context of Merton's local social and private housing market.

Our values inform our placement commissioning and matching processes and these are stated as follows:

- Children in the care of Merton Council will be placed in the accommodation that best meets their safety, health, education, emotional, behavioural, self-identity, family, and contact needs.

- Fostering most closely replicates a family environment, and Merton believes that children are best cared for in a family environment because relationships with caregivers sustain a child now and in their future lives.
- Some children reject fostering because they have been hurt or let down by their own families or perhaps, because they find close relationships difficult to maintain, but Merton believes that all children in its care should be enabled to grow up in a family environment whenever this is achievable.
- Children's homes can be a valuable service in meeting a child's needs and may be the placement of choice for some young people. However, Merton believes that children should be placed in a children's home only in exceptional circumstances, where there is a clearly assessed need, and this should be used as a transitional step to placing the child with a foster family whenever appropriate.
- Children in the care of Merton will be cared for in or near Merton, unless this is unsafe for them. Exceptionally, a child may be placed at some distance from Merton to meet their specific and unique needs.
- Merton has a preference for placing children with its own foster carers, because Merton- approved foster carers are well known to the council, as such we are able to support them to offer a home to children and young people with complex needs, having in many cases, a longstanding relationship with these foster carers. In addition, the cost of placing a child with a foster carer employed by an independent agency is much higher and the council has a duty of stewardship for public funding.
- Care experienced young people should be enabled to transition from their fostering placements to a range of accommodation best suited to their individual needs, including *Staying Put Arrangements* with their former foster carers where possible.

Education

Good practice also involves assessing whether placements allow a child to continue to attend their education or training and community contacts.

- Our Virtual School works with all Merton children in care, living both within and outside of Merton, to support them with all aspects of their education.
- The Access to Resources Team (ART – placements team) and the Virtual School continue to work effectively together to minimise days lost during disruption.
- Findings from our Foster Carers Survey highlight that 92% of respondents felt the support delivered by Merton's Virtual School was good or excellent. As well as the high satisfaction with the Virtual School, 90% of foster carers felt that the child placed with them attended a school which was good or excellent.
- At the end of Quarter 3 in 2021/22, about one in six children in our care have an Education, Health and Care Plan (15.9% - 22 children). The majority of these have a primary need of either SEMH (Social, Emotional and Mental Health) or ASD (Autistic Spectrum Disorder). We have strengthened our working relationship with Special

Educational Needs and Disabilities Integrated Service colleagues through the development of a joint education and Children's Social Care residential panel.

Health

We know that when we move children a long way from Merton, they may have more difficulty in accessing specialist health services.

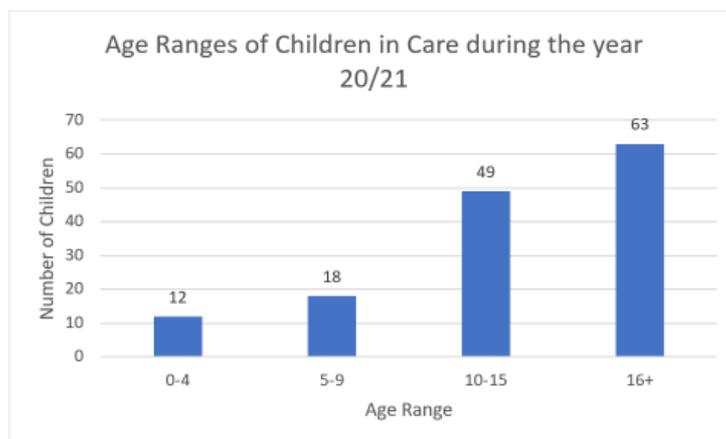
- Our dedicated in-house CAMHS team offers a specialist service to our children in care.
- Our looked after children's nurse maintains contact with all children in care, both within and outside of Merton.
- We have a protocol in place to ensure that children living outside of Merton have their mental health needs met in a timely way, if required.

5. Needs Analysis and Sufficiency Review 2019-2021

5.1 Children entering care and ceasing to be looked after

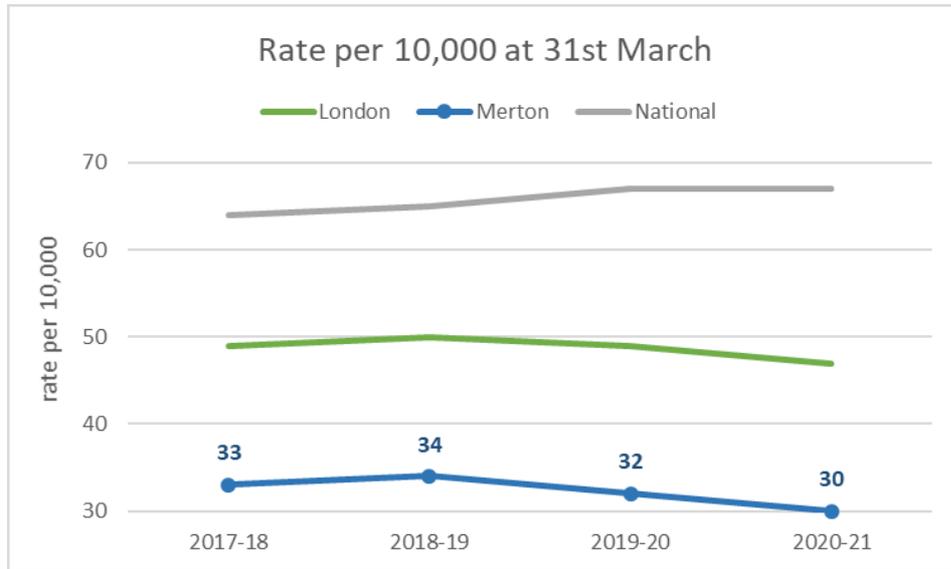
Whilst the number of children in care has continued to rise nationally over the last decade, Merton's number of children in care has been relatively stable. On 31st March 2021, there were 142 looked after children. This compares to 154 children in care March 2020. This drop is primarily down to the impact of Covid 19 and the reduction of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children entering our care during the first year of the Pandemic.

The majority of children in our care are aged over 16.

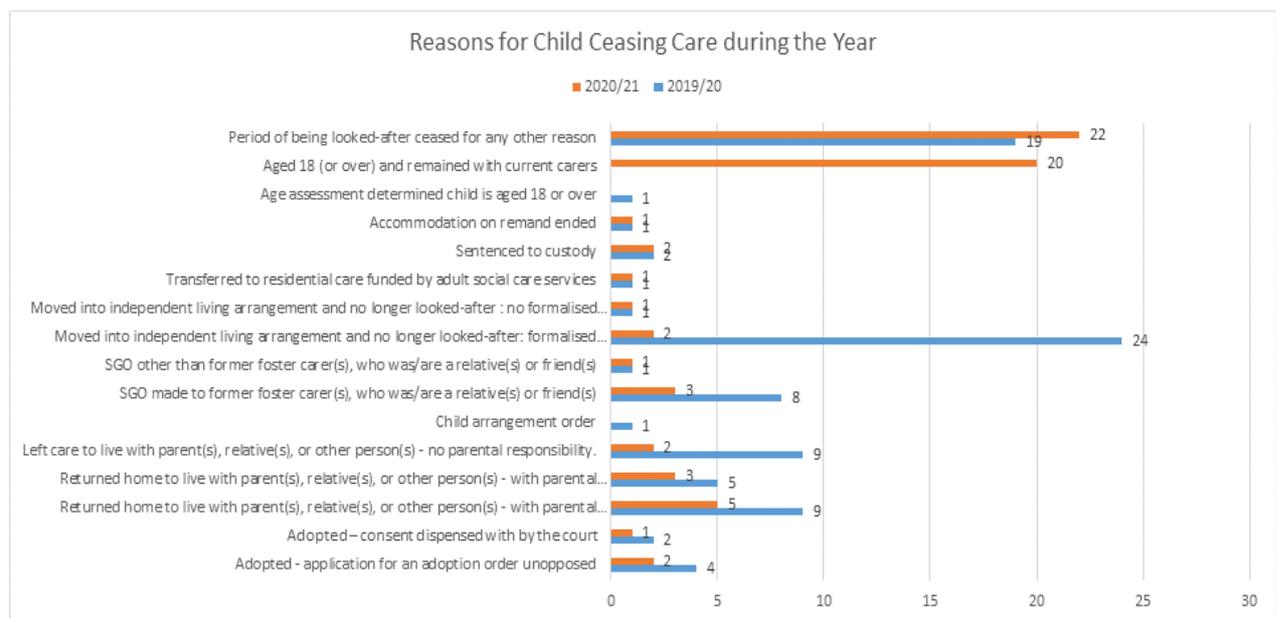


In the year 2019-20 there were 82 new admissions into care. This compares to 53 in 2020/21 a decrease of 35%. In 2020/21, a large proportion of starters (60%, 32 children) were aged 16 and over. This proportion is higher than national figures of starters in this age range, with England's average reported at 20%.

Merton's rate per 10,000 population has decreased to 30 and we continue to have one of the lowest population rates nationally.

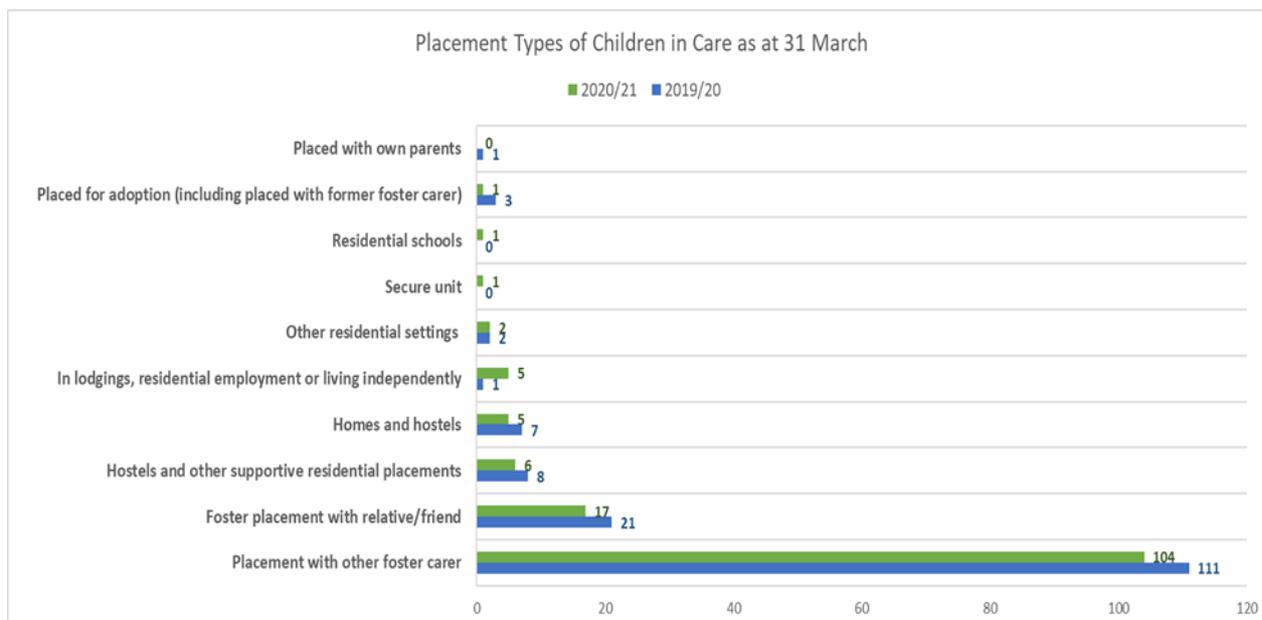


In previous years, the main reason for ceasing to be in care was 'moving into independent living arrangements'. This year the highest proportion of children ceased care for any other reason or they reached 18 years of age.



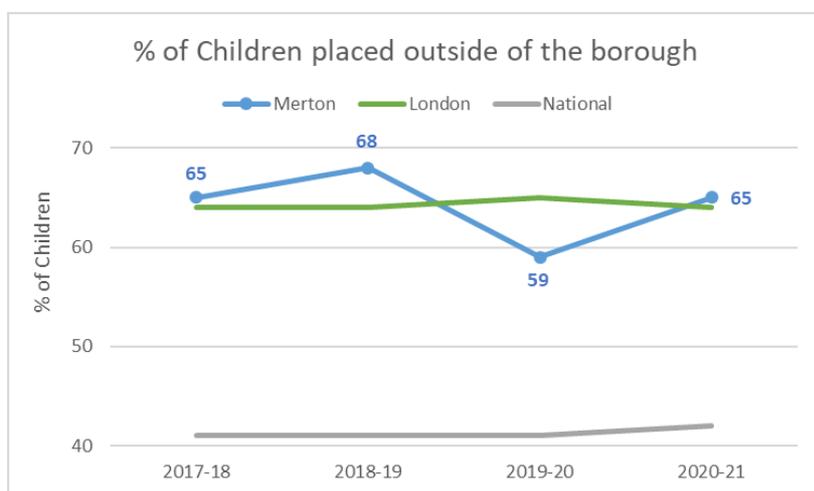
5.2 Placement types and numbers

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. At 31 March 2021, 85% of children in our care were placed in foster care. This is above the national figure of 71%. 46% of children were placed with in-house foster carers which is a slight decrease on the previous year.



For some young people, placements away from their home community are a key part of the care plan, as a result of anti-social behaviour/risk management.

The proportion of children placed outside of the borough has remained stable. In 2019/20, 41.5% of children were placed in the borough, compared with 34.5% in 2020/21 (a decrease of 7%). These relatively low figures are related to the borough's size.

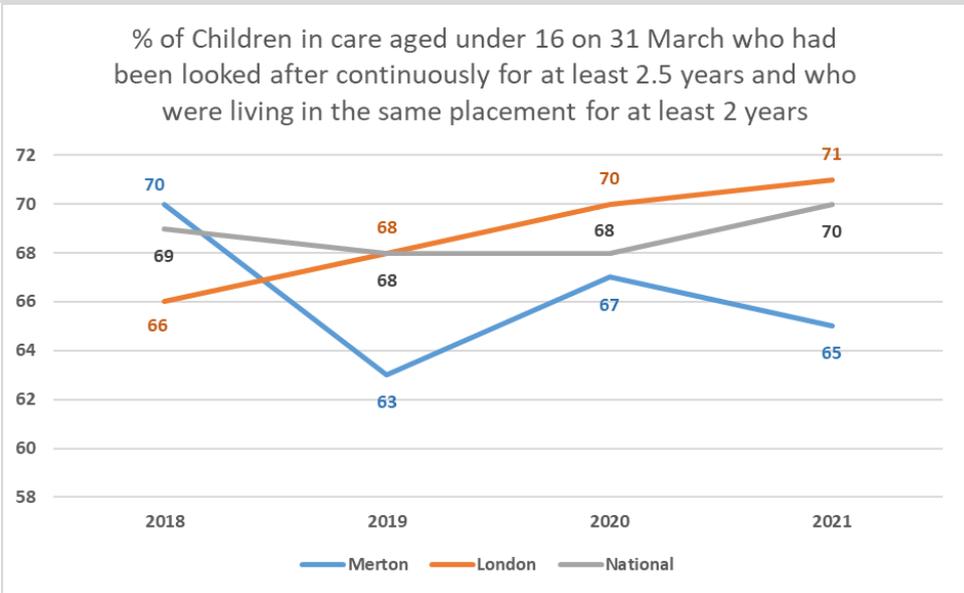
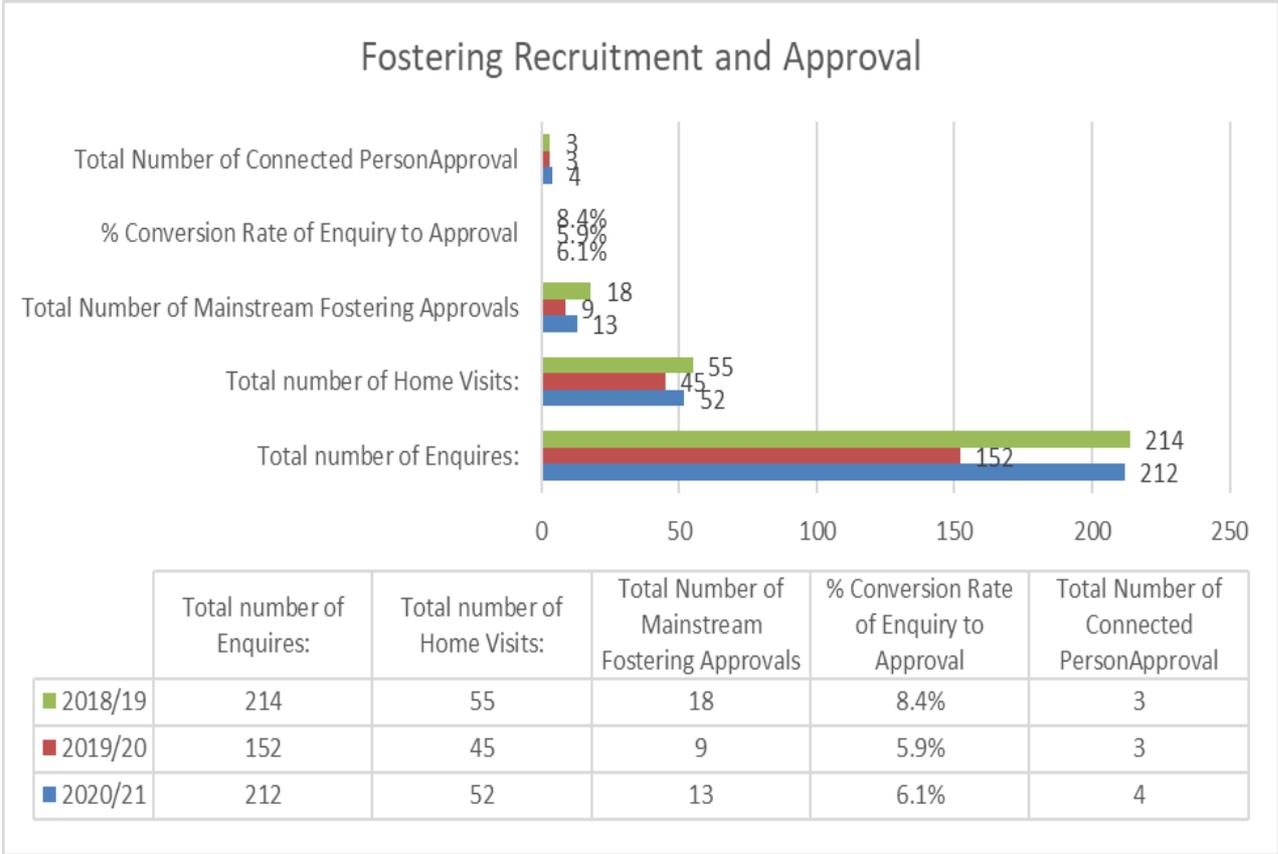


Placement stability is an important indicator and we continue to monitor this carefully. In Merton we measure the number and proportion of children in care with 3 or more placements in the preceding 12 months as well as the percentage of children in care as aged under 16 who have been looked after continuously for at least 2.5 years who were living in the same placement for at least 2 years.

As at 31st March 2021, 11 children (8%) had three or more placement moves in the preceding 12 months and 28 children under the age of 16 (65%) have been continuously looked after for at least 2.5 years and in the same placement for at least 2 years. As at 31st March 2020 the figures were 17 (11%) and 32 (67%) respectively.

5.3 Merton’s fostering service

Merton’s fostering service is divided into two teams. The Fostering Recruitment and Special Guardianship Team manages the recruitment and assessment of foster carers alongside Special Guardianship assessments and post Special Guardianship Order support. The Fostering Supervision Team oversees the support and development of our in-house foster carers.



Encouragingly, performance improved in the last reporting year with 13 mainstream carers recruited. Significantly the numbers of enquiries also rose after a relatively poor year in 2019/20.

When a child is unable to live with their parents, every effort is made to ensure that they can grow up in their family's network. When there is the possibility that a child may not remain with their parent, Merton utilises family group conferences as early as possible to identify members of the child's network who could put themselves forward as potential carers for us to undertake viability assessments.

In Merton we only use and continue to use statutory interventions when it is absolutely necessary. For this reason, we will always promote Court Orders which prevent the child from being in care (Special Guardianship Order, Adoption, Care Arrangements Order) wherever possible. Unfortunately, in some circumstances, it may be necessary for children to remain in care even when they can live with a carer connected to their network and where this is so, those connected carers would be approved as Merton foster carers. As part of the child's review cycle, the child's Independent Reviewing Officer, alongside the social work team, will consider if statutory intervention is still required or if another type of court order can be put in place which could provide the child and their foster family the opportunity of family life without statutory intervention. This consideration is extended and promoted to any foster home where the child has found stability and a sense of belonging.

Retention of our foster carers is one of Merton's strengths. As of 31/03/2021, we had 81 approved foster households (71 mainstream and 10 connected persons' carers). The previous year we had 79 foster households (68 mainstream and 11 connected persons).

6. Our commissioning intentions

6.1 Foster care

Our ambition is for all children to grow up in a family home environment. This is why the numbers of children and young people living in either semi-independent accommodation or residential care homes has decreased over the past few years. When we receive unaccompanied asylum seeking children into our care, the majority of whom are males above the age of 16, Merton is committed to ensure that they receive the same support and care offered in a family home environment.

We are also seeing a rise in the age of Merton resident children entering care at a later age. This is partly due to the impact of contextual harm including exploitation in the community which can result in our carers needing skills in managing complex behaviour. We know that foster homes can experience instability and sometimes disruption when children move into adolescence. This period of growing up can be challenging for any parent but given the accepted correlation between being in care and childhood trauma, we need to equip our foster parents with skills and support.

We receive a disproportionate number of babies into care (relative to other ages) largely due to their extreme vulnerability and the difficulties in assessing risk for babies in comparison to older children who are able to communicate clearer and have more adults in their daily lives. Whilst we will always need to prioritise children's safety, Merton is committed in its value that all children should live with and be cared for by their parents and family where ever it is safe enough to do so. For this reason and alongside the desire to see children live in family home environments, Merton is ambitious about increasing the number of parent and baby foster homes to ensure that babies are only separated from their parents when it is absolutely necessary. We strive to also use parent and baby foster placements for assessment purposes rather than residential parent and baby units.

We remain committed to increasing our in-house capacity overall but with a focus on meeting the needs of the following cohorts;

- Unaccompanied, asylum seeking children aged 15, 16 & 17
- Teenagers who have complex needs
- Brother and sister groups
- Parent and baby

6.2 Home stability – Mockingbird Family Model

Ensuring that children in care experience stability of home life is important to us. For this reason, we have invested in the Mockingbird Family Model which provides a community of between 8-12 foster homes. The strength of community aims to provide extra emotional and practical support to individual carers and children, which will positively impact on the child's sense of belonging and therefore stability of home life. The model provides sleepovers, short breaks, peer support, regular joint planning,

training and social activities. It works to strengthen the relationships between carers, children and young people, the fostering service and birth families.

Whilst the Covid-19 pandemic halted Merton's implementation of the model we successfully launched our first constellation (the community of 8-12 foster homes are referred to as constellations) in 2021 and will look to follow this up with another constellation in 2022.

6.3 Accommodation for young people transitioning to adulthood

Whilst we remain committed to meeting the needs of our young people in a family-like environment, there will always be a small number of young people who neither require nor want this. Therefore, it is important that we provide a variety of options for children who require a stepping stone between their foster family and receiving their own tenancy as an adult. This could be true of young people under the age of 18 but also our care experienced young people who are adults.

Spot purchasing Semi-Independent Accommodation (SIA) is currently Merton's largest type of provision to meet this need. A recent needs assessment suggested that an overhaul of existing provision was required. In response we have commenced a range of activity to broaden or provision, including:

- The Shared Lives Programme is currently used in adults' social care for residents with additional needs. The programme provides accommodation for adults to live in a person's home who will provide them with the support they require and can also continue supporting them once they move into their own property. This Programme has now been extended to Care Experienced Young People.
- There is a business case in process to repurpose some Merton assets into accommodation for care experienced young people.
- We are submitting a proposal to set up our own framework to procure a variety of accommodation providers alongside providers which offer support services so we can tailor accommodation and or support packages to meet the needs of individual young people.
- We are finalising a new joint protocol between the Housing Department and Children Social Care and there is ongoing work to strengthen our transitions work between Children and Adult services.

6.4 – The London Commissioning Alliance

Merton became a member of the London Commissioning Alliance in April 2021 who provide access to their Dynamic Purchasing Vehicle's for Independent Fostering Agencies and Residential Children's Homes. The decision to join the alliance followed an options paper of the pan London commissioning bodies to see what would work best for Merton. The effectiveness and value that membership of the alliance provides will be reviewed in March 2022.

6.5 Regionalisation of adoption services

Following the mandate from central government to regionalise adoption services, we transferred Merton's adoption functions to Adopt London South. Adopt London South

are now responsible for the recruitment, assessment and matching of adopters, alongside post adoption support. Alongside the other South London boroughs, we are supporting efforts to increase the number of prospective adopters, and successful adoptions. The partnership is specifically keen to see improvements to identifying prospective adopters for our children with characteristics which may make them difficult to adopt.

7. Conclusion

The world is currently living through unprecedented times with the Covid-19 pandemic. The Covid-19 Pandemic has impacted every corner of society without prejudice; however, for those people who already live on the fringes and face extra hurdles in life, the impact has been more severe. As good corporate parents, we take the responsibility of ensuring that we can meet the needs of our children in care and care experienced young people very seriously. This strategy sets out the need to recruit more in-house foster homes, especially for our older children including unaccompanied minors, parents with babies and brother and sister groups. We are excited about further embedding the Mockingbird Family Model and developing our partnerships with Adopt London South and the London Commissioning Alliance. Due to a high reliance on semi-independent provision for care experienced young people, a framework will be established which will provide more options to young people at a sustainable cost for supported provision between their care/foster placement and achieving their own tenancy.