Securing Sufficient Accommodation for Looked After Children and Care Leavers 2017 - 2018

London Borough of Merton

Issue Date	Data & Policy Analysis	Date Of the Next Review	Lead Head of Service
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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 its care by means of care orders or voluntary accommodation. The term *Corporate Parent*, put simply, means that Merton wants everything that a good parent wants for their child for the children in its care, and commits the resources and efforts of the council to achieving the very best that can be achieved for each child. Being a good Corporate Parent requires a whole systems approach across the council and all of its elected members and employees, in partnership with education, health, police and other agencies and individuals with responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of Children Looked After. 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.

Accommodating children and young people in the type and range of placements that are best able to meet their needs now and into their futures is crucial to helping children to achieve improved outcomes and to shaping their adult lives and opportunities. This document sets out the strategy by which Merton will plan to secure the types and sufficiency of placements it needs now and in the year ahead. The strategy is informed by needs analysis, good practice, experience to date, and provides a framework for the activity that will be undertaken to obtain high quality placements for our children and young people. This 'Sufficiency Statement' is not a stand alone strategy or approach because it is intersected by, and shares, the purposes, objectives, and actions, of cross-cutting plans, including the Merton Children and Young People's Plan, the Corporate Parenting Reports, the Looked After Children Strategy, and the Care Leavers Strategy. It should be read in conjunction with these documents. The Sufficiency Strategy is also informed by the Placement Quality and Improvement Plan which was initiated by Children's Services in September 2016 in response to an independent review of placement quality, range, and cost.

As shown in this document, there is much to celebrate in the performance of the council in the care of it's looked after children, young people and care leavers. Achievements include better performance than national performance in maintaining placement stability, so crucial to improved outcomes for the child, keeping siblings together, and placing children within, or close to, their local communities. The recruitment of foster carers is good and there is a high rate of retention. The fostering service performs well at ensuring younger children are placed with Merton's own foster carers. However, more needs to be done because Merton aspires to placing more of its children, and older children especially, with its own foster carers and being less reliant on the private fostering sector, and to enabling children in residential children's homes to transition to fostering placements, or to returning home to their families, whenever safe and appropriate.

There are 32 boroughs in London recruiting foster carers and placing children with private fostering agencies. In addition, some local authorities from outside London are also placing children in London, so that the local 'economy' of placements presents complex challenges to sufficiency. The Placement Quality and Improvement Plan will ensure that Merton can provide strong leadership in the management of placement resources in South London in the coming year. Merton also aspires to enabling care leavers to transition to independent living in the range and types of accommodation best suited to their needs; a challenge in the context of Merton's local social and private housing market. This document is a demonstration both of Merton's leadership and commitment to managing the complexities of the placements economy in South London to achieve sufficiency and quality of placements for it's looked after children, and of the values that informs Merton's approach.

2. Values Approach to Placement Commissioning

Our values inform our placement commissioning and matching processes and this can be stated, simply, by the following:

- Children in the care of Merton 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 care givers 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, but Merton believes that children should be placed in a home only in exceptional circumstances, where there is a clearly assessed need, and 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 it has approved its own foster carers and knows them well, having in many cases, a long relationship with them. In addition the cost of placing a child with a foster carer employed by a private agency is very much higher and the council has a duty of stewardship for public funds

- Care leavers should be enabled to transition from their fostering placements to a range of accommodation types best suited to their individual needs, including Staying Put Arrangements with their former foster carers where possible

3. Policy context

3.1 Sufficiency Duty

The Sufficiency Statement sets out Merton's strategic approach to securing sufficient accommodation to meet the needs of our looked after children. 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 Government guidance on supporting looked after children and care leavers

3.2.1 Putting Children First (DfE Strategy July 2016)

Putting Children First sets out the Government's transformation agenda for children's social care and social work based around reform of the 'three pillars' of the system: 'people and leadership', 'practice and systems' and 'governance and accountability'. The key proposals for improvements for looked after children are:

A Safe and Stable Home – this includes legislating to set out in law[1] a set of corporate parenting principles which apply to looked after children and care leavers up to the age of 25, and which guide the way in which the local authority 'acts as any good parent would for children in care and care leavers'. The principles include a focus on safety and stability in home lives, relationships, education or work; preparation for independence; promotion of health and well-being; access to and use of services; and participation in decisions about their lives.

Foster Placements that Work – this includes using learning from a number of 'Innovation Programmes' which have started to show how stable placement can be achieved for even challenging children when carers are properly trained and supported and young people have access to respite and therapy.

3.2.2 The Role of Residential Care (July 2016) – this includes recommendations from a recent review of residential care by Sir Martin Narey[2] that residential care is the right place for some children – to manage a crisis, to provide intensive support to prepare for a foster placements, and in some cases as a long term option.

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[1] Children and Social Work Bill 2016 pp. 1&2 – Corporate Parenting Principles.

[2] Residential Care in England: Report of Sir Martin Narey's independent review of children's residential care, July 2016

3.2.3 Keep on Caring: supporting young people from care to independence (Cross Government Guidance July 2016) sets out how the state, as corporate parents will support care leavers to achieve 5 key outcomes:

- Living independently – this includes a number of the provisions to be set out in law[3]: the new 'corporate parenting principles'; the duty to publish a 'local offer' of services for care leavers; and access to a local authority Personal Adviser up to the age of 25. In addition there will be a new 'care leaver covenant' for other organizations to sign up to voluntarily.
- Access to education, employment and training – this includes improved access to supported internships, apprenticeships (including meeting training costs), further and higher education, and employment.
- Stability: feeling safe and secure – this includes continued funding for the 'Staying Put' Duty[4], introduction of the 'Staying Close' recommendations[5], and increased funding to support UASC children.
- Access to health support - this includes improved pathways and models of support for children and young people with mental health problems, and improved accountability for services via the CQC and JTAI.
- Financial stability – this includes allowing a number of exemptions, for care leavers, from changes to eligibility for housing support, and ensures access to money management support through the Personal Adviser role.

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 Statement' includes analysis of data segmented by gender, disability, ethnicity and age as an impact assessment for these groups.

3.4. User Voice

The Sufficiency Statement includes an overview of the user voice activity, undertaken by the Children, Schools and Families Department, with looked after children and care leavers, which has impacted on 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 and requires that when working with children in need, their wishes and feelings should be ascertained and used to inform making decisions. It also reflect 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 of the system, and meets the requirements of the new corporate parenting principles[6] which state that in the provision of services for looked after children and care leavers their views, wishes and feelings should be taken into account.

4. Needs Analysis and Sufficiency review 2015/16

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[3] Children and Social Work Bill 2016 pp. 1&2 – Corporate Parenting Principles.

[4] Children and Families Act 2014

[5] Residential Care in England (as above)

[6] Children and Social Work Bill (as above)

4.1 Placement types and numbers

The types of placements required for CLA in the previous two years is shown in Table 1. This shows that of the wide range of placement types the significant majority of children were accommodated with in-house foster carers in keeping with Merton's values and the needs of the children. The second greatest number of children were accommodated with foster carers from private agencies. Fostering is overwhelmingly the environment most closely matched to the needs of the greatest number of children and young people. The increase of children being placed in children's homes is under review at this time to ensure that children are appropriately placed, and that their plans for transition to fostering or other types of accommodation are being progressed appropriate to their assessed needs.

Table 1: Number of placements by placement type 2015-16 with 2014-15 benchmark[7]

Type of placement	2014-15			2015-16			Difference (2014-15 to 2015-16)	
	No. of children	No. of placements	% of placements	No. of children	No. of placements	% of placements	No. of children	No. of placements
In-House foster care	131	149	40%	139	163	40%	8	14
Agency foster care	79	90	24%	75	93	23%	-4	3
16+ Semi-Independent Provision	43	53	14%	46	61	15%	3	8
Children's Homes	26	41	11%	38	46	11%	12	5
Adoption	15	15	4%	17	17	4%	2	2
Young Offender Institution or Prison	2	2	1%	7	7	2%	5	5
NHS/Health Trust or other establishment providing medical or nursing care	5	5	1%	5	6	1%	0	1
Placed with own parents or other person with parental responsibility	8	8	2%	3	5	1%	-5	-3
Independent Living	1	1	0%	5	5	1%	4	4
Family Centre or mother and baby unit	3	3	1%	3	3	1%	0	0
All Residential Schools, except where dual-registered as a school and children's home	4	4	1%	2	2	0%	-2	-2
Secure Unit	3	5	1%	1	1	0%	-2	-4
Residential care home	1	1	0%	1	1	0%	0	0
Total	255	377	100%	273	410	100%	18	33

Source: SSDA903 2014-15 & 2015-16

## Key Findings: All Placements 2015-16

- 410 placements during 2015-16 (used by 273 children)

- 163 children in placements open at 31 March 2016

- One-third of placements for children aged 16 years and over at placement start date (140 out of 410 placements; 34%)

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5. Fostering

5.1. Age, gender and distance of foster care placements

The number of children placed in agency foster care has remained largely stable. However Table 2 (showing the age profile of these children) demonstrates that children aged 12-15 years are more likely to be placed with private fostering agencies than with in-house foster carers. Whilst it is an achievement that younger children are cared for by in-house foster carers, it is recognised that greater capacity is required in-house to care for older children. This age group now accounts for a third of admissions into care, whereas in past years they were proportionately a smaller number.

Table 2: Percentage of In-House and Agency placements by age range (2015-16)
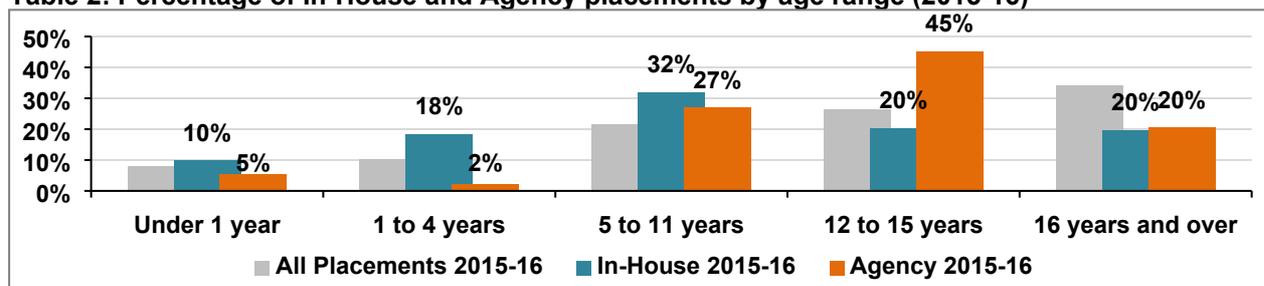
Source: SSDA903 2015-16

There are more girls than boys placed with private fostering agencies, as Table 3 shows, in comparison with in-house foster care.

Table 3: Number and percentage of In-House and Agency placements by gender (2015-16)

Placement Demographics		In-House Foster Care (2015-16)			Agency foster care (2015-16)		
		No. of children	No. of placements	% of placements	No. of children	No. of placements	% of placements
Gender	Male	79	93	57%	37	46	49%
	Female	60	70	43%	38	47	51%
Total		139	163	100%	75	93	100%

Source: SSDA903 2015-16

Merton performs well at placing the overwhelming majority of its children within or close to the borough as Table 4 shows; 86% are within five miles of their family home. Placements with private fostering agencies are less likely to be close to the child's home because of the areas in which these agencies recruit their foster carers, and this is particularly true for children's homes which may be placed some distance from London.

Table 4: Percentage of In-House and Agency placements by distance from home (2015-16)
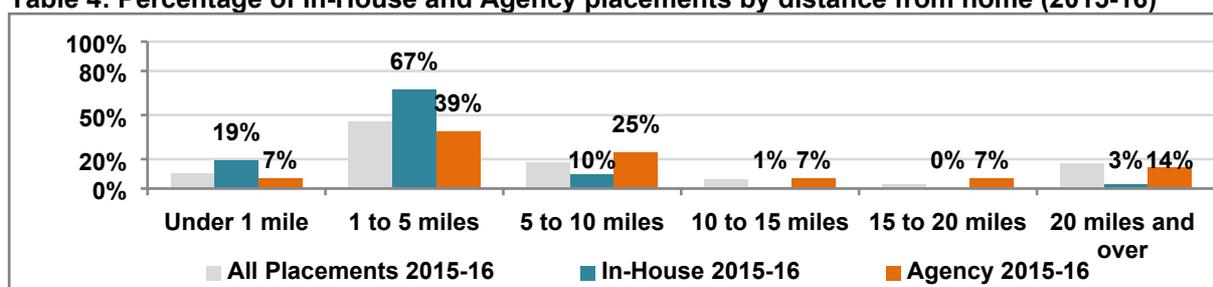
Source: SSDA903 2015-16

5.2. Length of fostering placements

As should be anticipated, Table 5 shows that placements with the private fostering agencies are usually for longer length of duration than in-house foster care and this is attributable to the younger ages of children cared for in-house, with greater likelihood of returning home or achieving permanence through Adoption, Special Guardianship, or other means. At 31 March 2016, a higher proportion of agency foster placements were open for a period of two years or more than the In-House foster placements. Additionally, a high number of young people accommodated by means of Police Protection are only in care for a short period of time before returning home. It should be noted, that the national statistical return shows that for those children remaining in the care of Merton, their placement stability is better than local and national comparators. Merton is committed to creating permanence for children in their fostering placements, and where appropriate to the child's needs, Merton matches children to their private fostering agencies carers.

Table 5: Number and percentage of In-House and Agency placements by placement length (open as 31 March 2016 and those ceased during 2015-16)

Placement Demographics		In-House Foster Care (2015-16)			Agency foster care (2015-16)		
		No. of children	No. of placements	% of placements	No. of children	No. of placements	% of placements
Placement length (Open placements as at 31 March)	Less than 1 month	7	7	10%	2	2	5%
	1 to 3 months	10	10	14%	5	5	13%
	3 to 6 months	12	12	17%	4	4	10%
	6 to 12 months	12	12	17%	7	7	18%
	1 to 2 years	16	16	23%	5	5	13%
	2 years or more	12	12	17%	16	16	41%
Total		**69**	**69**	**100%**	**39**	**39**	**100%**
Placement length (Ceased placements during year)	Less than 1 month	28	33	35%	19	22	41%
	1 to 3 months	16	16	17%	6	6	11%
	3 to 6 months	12	12	13%	8	9	17%
	6 to 12 months	15	15	16%	6	6	11%
	1 to 2 years	14	14	15%	4	4	7%
	2 years or more	4	4	4%	7	7	13%
Total (no duplicates)		**87**	**94**	**100%**	**45**	**54**	**100%**

Source: SSDA 903 2015-16

5.3. What this data tells us

Use of foster placements has increased during 2015/16 with 3 additional young people and 17 additional foster placements being used throughout the year compared with 2014/15 data. It is a particular strength to note that 14 of those additional placements were provided through Merton in house foster carers. As agency foster carers are significantly more expensive than our in house carers, this also represents good use of the Council's budget.

As the majority of foster carers live within 10 miles of Merton (96%) this means that there is likely to have been less disruption of services for these children and young people, including fewer moves of education provision or changes to their health provision. It also means that where there are contact arrangements in place, it is likely to be easier for children and young people to maintain contact with their family and friends. These are all significant factors in supporting placement stability and help to reduce the impact of coming into care on children and young people.

There remain a higher percentage of our young people aged 12+ placed with agency foster carers (65%). This suggests the need to increase our numbers of carers who are experienced in caring for older children, and to equip prospective foster carers in training with the necessary skills and with the expectation of caring for older children. Many foster carers report their very positive experiences of caring for older children, but it is recognised that some children have complex and challenging behaviours that require additional resilience from their carers and additional support to their foster carers. Merton is currently exploring approaches to equipping sufficient foster carers with the skills and resilience to care for older children with challenging needs.

The needs analysis of the Sufficiency Statement has demonstrated the need for Merton to increase in-house fostering capacity for children and young people aged over 11 years, and particularly for older girls. This will lead to less reliance on private agency providers of fostering for this age group, and also to a decrease in the number of children placed with private children's homes. The in-house fostering service is successful at caring for younger children and in providing placements of shorter duration as a bridge to the child returning home or moving to a more permanent alternative arrangement. The need now exists for the in-house service to acquire increased capacity in caring for older children, and for providing more placements of longer duration, including permanence.

Key Findings: In-House Foster Care	Key Findings: Agency Foster Care
• 163 In-House foster care placements during 2015-16 (40% of all placements during 2015-16)	• 93 Agency foster care placements during 2015-16 (23% of all placements during 2015-16)

5.4. What we will do

- We will continue to target our recruitment of foster carers to provide more carers for teenagers aged 12+ of either gender to meet the increased need for in house carers for this age group. The recruitment target for 2016/17 target is 15 carers with at least 7 for target groups of teenagers. Recruiting foster carers for teenagers is a challenge as there is a competitive market with IFAs and other local authorities also trying to build up their own provision.

- Although we will recruit for our target group we are also aware that we need to ensure Merton

6. Development of Merton's fostering service - In House Fostering

6.1 Introduction

There were 72 in house foster carers over the course of last year, the majority providing 'Task Based Care' services. Task Based care is focused on the permanent plan for the child; including return home, adoption, or by another route to permanence. Eight in-house foster carers were Connected Persons Carers under Regulation 24 of the Children Act 1989. These are placements with friends or family members which the council promotes whenever appropriate to the child's needs and family circumstances. A person connected to the child can be approved as their temporary foster carer for a maximum of 16 to enable completion of the fostering assessment.

Foster carers are recruited from a wide range of personal circumstances and backgrounds, and they bring an equally wide range of experiences and skills to the fostering task. There is considerable strength and creativity to be found in this diversity to the benefit of our children, and Merton positively encourages and welcomes applications from any persons who are motivated to come forward and be assessed as a potential foster carer for a looked after child. There is no 'ideal type' of a foster carer but Merton does look for the same commitment, empathy and the desire to help a child grow to their fullest potential, that is to be found in all good foster carers.

6.2 Foster carer age and ethnicity profile

It is a fact, as demonstrated by Table 6 that 50% of Merton's foster carers are aged 50+ years, and 25% are aged 60+ years. Age is not a bar to fostering, and on the contrary, some of our most active and skilled foster carers are our older foster carers, but the need clearly exists to recruit younger foster carers to provide service continuity as older carers retire.

Table 6: Demographics of In-House Foster Carers during 2015-16

In-House Foster Carers 2015-16		No.	% (out of 72)
Age range (as at 31 March 2016)	**18 to 30 years**	0	0%
	30 to 40 years	8	11%
	40 to 50 years	10	14%
	50 to 60 years	36	50%
	Over 60 years	18	25%
Ethnicity	**White**	30	42%
	Black	30	42%
	Mixed	8	11%
	Asian	3	4%
	Other	1	1%
Location	**Merton**	47	65%
	Sutton	10	14%
	Croydon	6	8%
	Wandsworth	4	6%
	Lambeth	3	4%
	Southwark	1	1%
	Kent	1	1%

Source: Fostering Register 2015-16 – Fostering Team

The ethnicity profile of Merton's foster carers is similar to the ethnicity profile of our looked after children. The majority of foster carers are of White British, Black Caribbean and Black African ethnicities, and this may change over the next few years as the borough's resident population becomes more diverse.

The majority of Merton's foster carers live within the borough and the majority of placements are within 5 miles of the child's home address. Merton has recruited foster carers from neighbouring boroughs because foster carers sometimes choose to be approved by a borough other than their home borough, and we have foster carers in Sutton, Croydon and Wandsworth. Only two of our foster carers live further afield in Southwark and Kent.

6.3 Approvals and occupancy rates

As shown by Table 7, increasing the number of fostering placements available to teenage children remains a priority. This is a challenge national and locally, because many foster carers have a preference for children aged below 12 years. This can be for reasons of their own family circumstances, for example, the ages of their children or grandchildren and it can also be for reasons of believing that caring for a teenager is more complex or demanding of additional skills. Some foster carers are apprehensive of caring for older children. However, it is often the case that foster carers who are caring for older children describe their experiences as deeply rewarding and personally enriching.

Table 7: Number of In-House foster carers offering task based care during 2015-16 by ages of looked after children approved for

Age (yrs)	No. of task based foster carers approved for this age group during 2015-16	% All approved task based foster carers during 2015-16 (out of 58)
Under 1	44	76%
1 to 4	45	78%
5 to 11	49	84%
12 to 15	48	83%
16+	46	79%
All ages (0-18)	38	66%

Source: Fostering Register 2015-16 – Fostering Team

Foster carers are approved to care for between 1 and 3 children and placement capacity within the fostering service is measured as 100% of all these placements. However, this is a hypothetical measurement in many respects, because 100% of all placements will not be occupied by children. The reasons for placements remaining without a child at any one point throughout the year can include, for example, sickness of the foster carer, a child requiring to be placed on their own with a carer approved for 2 or 3 children, or the age of the children needing placements is not the age preference of the foster carer. Table 8 shows that 74% of placements were occupied by children during the year.

Table 8: Percentage of In-House task based foster placements used by at least one child during 2015-16 (at month end) – trend against 2014-15
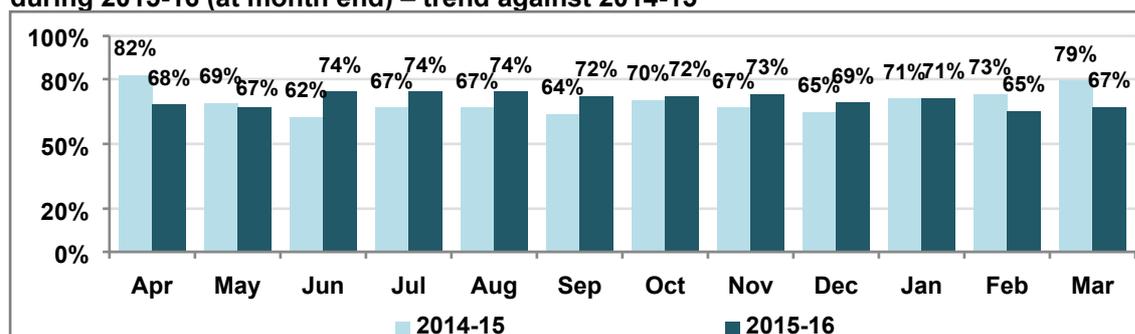
Source: Fostering Team - Fostering Register 2014-15 & 2015-16

Table 9 shows that one in five approved fostering placements was not used during 2015-16, meaning that 22% of placements were without children. As said, there are understandable reasons for this, but the fostering service is committed to keeping placement vacancy under scrutiny to ensure that vacancies are not the consequence of a failure to fully utilize the in-house resources.

Table 9: Percentage occupancy of task based foster placements during 2015-16

Occupancy Rates during 2015-16	No.	% Total
0% Occupancy	13	22%
1% to 50% Occupancy	7	12%
50% to 75% Occupancy	5	9%
75% to 99% Occupancy	11	19%
100% Occupancy	22	38%
Total	58	100%

Source: SSDA 903 Return – Episode CSV & Fostering Register 2015-16 – Fostering Team

6.4 Retention of foster carers

Table 10 shows that foster carers for Merton remain committed and are retained by the service, and we know from survey feedback that a very high percentage of our foster carers describe their relationship with the service as good.

Table 10: Number and percentage of In-House foster carers by length of time approved as a carer (as at 31 March 2016 or de-registration date)[8]
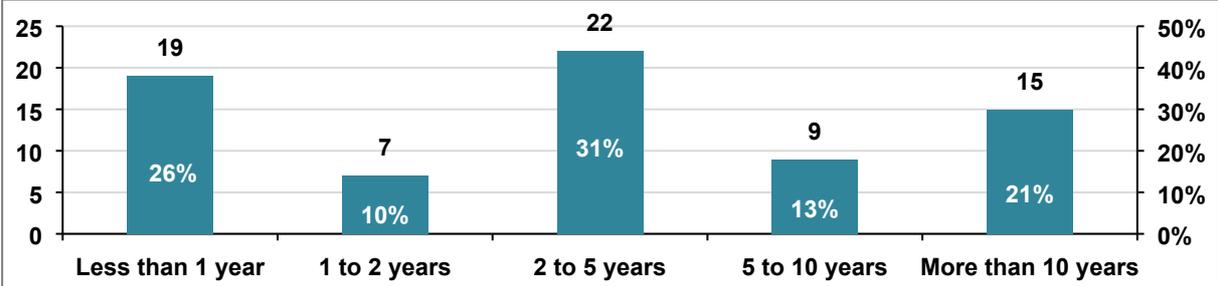
Source: Fostering Register 2015-16 – Fostering Team

Table 11 shows that Merton is successful at recruiting more foster carers each year than leave the service, usually for reasons of sickness or retirement.

Table 11: Retention of In-House foster carers during 2015-16

In-House foster carers	No. of In-House foster carers
Permanently recruited during 2015-16	18
De-registered during 2015-16	11
Net Gain during 2015-16	7

Source: Fostering Team - Fostering Register 2015-16

6.5 What this data tells us

Many foster carers are aged 50+ years because, for example, they may choose fostering when their own children have become adults and left home, or because they may want a change of lifestyle from their previous careers. Merton welcomes the experience and wisdom they bring to the task of caring for looked after children. However, the age profile of our foster carers does raise challenges for the longer term continuity and growth of the fostering service if younger carers are not recruited. Children Services have been successful in the previous year in attracting younger people into fostering, and 50% of the 18 carers recruited are aged below 50 years. Retention of foster carers is good in Merton. Despite the numbers of boroughs recruiting foster carers in London, and the many private fostering agencies also recruiting in London, Merton is successful at attracting foster carers to its own fostering service and retaining them for many years.

A significant number of foster carers had no placements in the previous year. This is being scrutinized and monitored within the fostering service. However, it is also clear that Merton has a need for foster carers to be willing to care for older children. Too high a number of our children are placed with private fostering agencies for this reason. Research, feedback, and learning from elsewhere, shows that foster carers can be attracted to caring for older children and can develop resilience and skill in working with very challenging behaviours when they receive the package of support that works best for them. The Placement Quality and Improvement Plan includes actions to explore the types and resourcing of support that work best.

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[8] Please note: One of the 19 foster carers approved for less than year was approved prior to 2015-16 – they were approved for less than 1 year as they were de-registered within 2015-16

Key Findings: Profile of In-House Foster Carers

- 72 In-House foster carers were on the Merton Fostering Register for a period of time during 2015/16

- Majority of In-House foster carers offered Task Based or Short Term Care Provision (58 out of 72 carers; 81%)

- Three-quarters of In-House foster carers aged over 50 as at 31 March 2016 (54 out of 72 carers; 75%)

- In-House foster carers predominately based in Merton and within 5 miles of the child's home residence

- Two-thirds of In-House foster carers offering task based care are approved to take children of any age up to 18 (38 out of 58 task based carers; 66%).

- Between 65% and 74% of In-House foster carers offering task based placements were used by at least one looked after child at any given time during 2015-16

- One in five placements not used at all during 2015-16 (13 out of 58 task based foster placements; 22%)

6.6 What we will do

- We will continue to increase our pool of existing foster carers by recruiting 15 new carers this year. These new carers should reflect the need for more carers with the capacity to foster young people aged 12+.

- We will increase the current capacity of our existing carers by ensuring and developing adequate support for them when they take a placement. This includes improving the level of support for carers taking on children outside of their preferred age ranges.

- In view of the age demographic of our current carers, we will recruit younger foster carers to future-proof the service and create a longer term workforce

- We will review the Foster Carer Payment Scheme to ensure this remains in line with the needs of our children, young people and foster carers and that it is appropriately benchmarked against other local authorities and fostering agencies.

- We need to develop our existing pool of carers to ensure we are maximising their skills. This involves our Fostering Supervision Team working with carers as part of their annual review process to ensure they access appropriate learning and development

- We will maximise the use of our in house placements for all of our looked after children and young people

- As part of the annual review processes for foster carers, we will continue to ensure that we are have carers with as wide an approval range as possible to provide flexibility and opportunities when placement finding.

- We will improve the quality of referral information that the foster carer receives and ensure that placement plans are available in a timely manner to support carers to take on young people with more challenging behaviours

7. Children's homes

7.1 Introduction

Children's homes are usually smaller residential units for 4 or more children with team of staff available to the child throughout the day and with night supervision. This provision is subject to Children's Homes Regulations, and is inspected by Ofsted. One member of staff will be the child's keyworker, helping them to make improvement in their health, education, social, and behavioural development. Some homes have specialist input from psychologists and teachers, for example. Like private fostering agencies, many children's homes are privately run for profit. The average national cost of a placement for a child is £3,250 per week. Some local authorities have children's homes of their own, although in recent years many local authorities have closed these for reasons that can include the costs of running them, which are similar to those of the private sector, for safeguarding reasons in the wake of lessons learned from Rochdale and Rotherham among others, and because of the recognition that fostering provides a family environment for a child in which to build and sustain relationships. Merton has one home of its own to provide short breaks for disabled children only. These are not children in the care of Merton, they are children in the care of their families and requiring short breaks. Currently there are only two private children's homes in the borough that could be used by Merton because they are judged by Ofsted to be good, one of which is for children with disabilities.

7.2 Number, gender and ethnicity profile of children in homes

There has been a 46% increase in the number of children placed in Children's Homes during 2015-16 compared with the previous financial year, and this growth in number can be attributed to a rise in the number of children aged 12 to 15 years placed in this type of provision. As Table 12 shows, nearly 75% of placements are for males but there has been an increase in the number of placements for females.

Table 12: Number and Percentage of Children's Home placements by Gender during 2015-16 (against 2014-15 data)

Placement Demographics		Children's Homes (2014-15)			Children's Homes (2015-16)		
		No. of children	No. of placements	% of placements	No. of children	No. of placements	% of placements
Gender	Male	21	36	88%	26	33	72%
	Female	5	5	12%	12	13	28%
Total		26	41	100%	38	46	100%

Source: SSDA903 2014-15 & 2015-16

There is an increase in the number of placements for children in children's homes from Black and Minority Ethnic Backgrounds (up 13 percentage points compared to 2014-15), as shown in Table 13.

18

Table 13: Percentage of Children's Home placements by ethnicity during 2015-16 (against 2014-15 data)
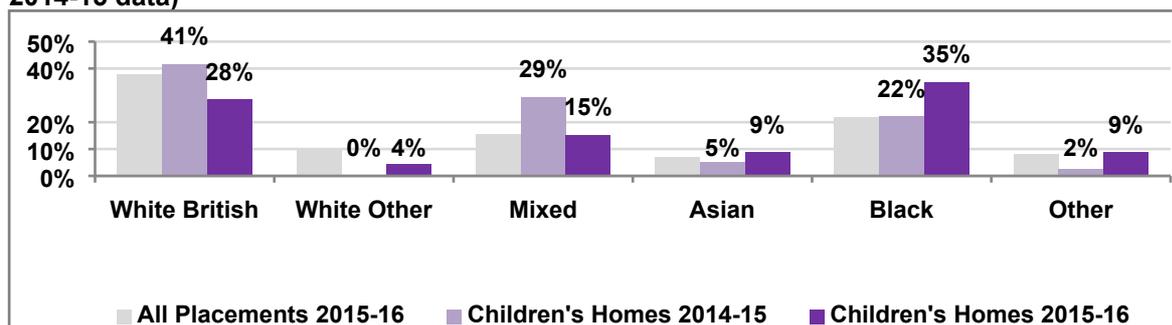
Source: SSDA903 2014-15 & 2015-16

Two-thirds of the Children's Home placements used during 2015-16 were for children with a Statement of Special Educational Needs or Education, Health and Care Plans administered by the Merton SEN Team (30 out of 46 placements; 65%). In terms of the Primary SEN needs of these children, the majority had either Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs or were on the Autistic Spectrum (collectively 22 out of the 30 placements for children with a Statement of EHCP; 74%).

One-third of the Children with a Statement of EHCP using Children's Home Placements were BME males aged 12 to 15 years old (10 out of 30 placements; 33%). In terms of primary need, ten out of the 11 children identified with an Autism Spectrum Disorder were from black and minority ethnic backgrounds (91%) whilst the ethnicity breakdown for Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs was more diverse (six children from BME backgrounds and five children from White British backgrounds).

Table 14: Number and percentage of Children's Home placements by Special Educational Need status and Primary Need classification (2015-16)

Placement Demographics		Children's Homes (2015-16)		
		No. of children	No. of placements	% of placements
Statemented SEN or EHC Plan	Yes - Statemented or EHC Plan	26	30	65%
	Not Statemented/ without EHC Plan	12	16	35%
Total		**38**	**46**	**100%**
Statemented SEN or EHC Plan cases - Primary Need	SEMH - Social, Emotional & Mental Health	9	11	37%
	ASD - Autistic Spectrum Disorder	9	11	37%
	MLD - Moderate Learning Difficulty	3	3	10%
	SPLD - Specific Learning Difficulty	0	0	0%
	SLD - Severe Learning Difficulty	3	3	10%
	VI - Visual Impairment	1	1	3%
	SLCN - Speech, Language & Communication Needs	0	0	0%
	Unknown	1	1	3%
Total		**26**	**30**	**100%**

Source: SEN Team – SEN list (June 2016)

7.3 Children's Homes – Placement Distance

Children's home placements are predominately situated further away from Merton than other placement types, as suitable placements are harder to acquire locally for children with complex special educational and social needs and disabilities (Table 15). With more children being placed in Children's Home placements, there has been a 16 percentage point increase in the proportion of placements situated more than 20 miles away from the child's home address.

Table 15: Percentage of Children's Home placements by placement distance from home (2014-2016)
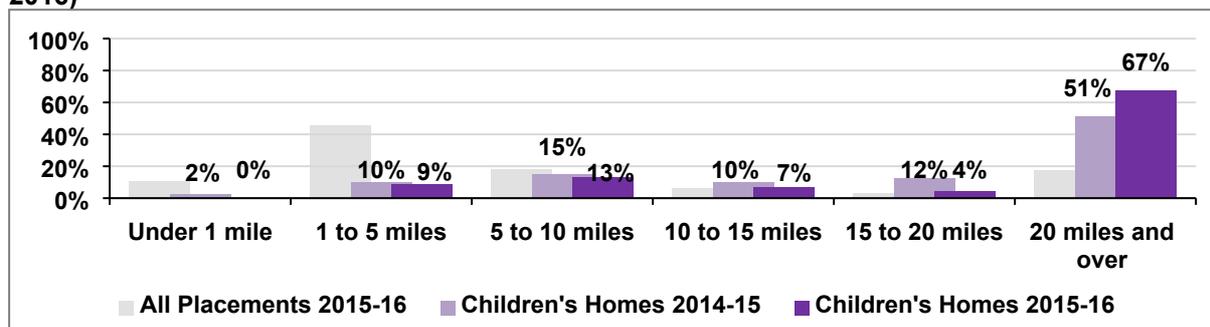
Source: SSDA903 2014-15 & 2015-16

Nine out of 46 (20%) placements during 2015/16 were in residential school placements for young people with either a SEN Statement of EHC Plan. There are no residential schools within Merton. Seven of 46 Children's Home placements (15%) were placements where a crisis intervention approach is offered for a time limited period in order to stabilise a young person's behaviour. All of these are placed in rural locations outside of Merton.

7.4 Children's Homes – Stability of placements

One-third of open Children's Home placements (as at 31 March 2016), had lasted for more than one year (10 out of 27 placements; 37%). All 10 of these placements were for children with a Statement of SEN. Proportionally, the percentage of open Children's home placements lasting for 1 year or more is in line with All Placements. However, in terms of ceased placements, the proportion of Children's Home placements lasting over 6 months is much higher than All Placements (58% for children's homes compared to 34% for All Placements).

Table 16: Number and percentage of Children's Home placements by placement length (open as 31 March 2016 and those ceased during 2015-16)

Placement Demographics		All Placements (2015-16)			Children's Homes (2015-16)		
		No. of children	No. of placements	% of placements	No. of children	No. of placements	% of placements
Placement length (Open placements as at 31 March)	Less than 1 month	15	15	9%	1	1	4%
	1 to 3 months	27	27	17%	4	4	15%
	3 to 6 months	24	24	15%	2	2	7%
	6 to 12 months	36	36	22%	10	10	37%
	1 to 2 years	28	28	17%	6	6	22%
	2 years or more	33	33	20%	4	4	15%
Total		**163**	**163**	**100%**	**27**	**27**	**100%**
Placement length (Ceased placements during year)	Less than 1 month	62	83	34%	3	4	21%
	1 to 3 months	35	37	15%	0	0	0%
	3 to 6 months	37	43	17%	4	4	21%
	6 to 12 months	43	45	18%	8	8	42%
	1 to 2 years	26	26	11%	2	2	11%
	2 years or more	13	13	5%	1	1	5%
Total (no duplicates)		**176**	**247**	**100%**	**15**	**19**	**100%**

Source: SSDA903 2015-16

More stable Children's Home placements compared to the previous financial year suggest that most placements being utilised by the Access to Resources Team are meeting the complexity of need identified by the SEN Team for our children with a Statement or EHCP.

7.5 What this data tells us

Some children and young people can benefit from being placed within a children's home. However, for most children this will be of short duration because they are transitioning to other placement arrangements. The data tells us that there has been a significant increase in the numbers of children placed in homes in the previous year. This can be explained in part, by a change from the Department of Education codes that ended the former distinction between residential schools placements and children homes placements. However, there has also been an incremental growth in the numbers of children placed in children's homes, particularly Black males. This is recognised in the Placement Quality and Improvement Plan, and actions in response to this includes establishing a panel to review all residential placements and establishing alternatives to placing in children's homes, including a larger fostering capacity for older children and children with challenging behaviours.

Key Findings: Children's Homes

- 46 Children's Home placements during 2015-16 (11% of all placements during 2015-16)

- 27 Children in Children's Home placements as at 31 March 2016

- Nearly two-thirds of Children's Homes placements during 2015-16 for children aged 12 to 15 years old at start of placement (27 out of 46 placements; 59%)

- 72% of Children's Homes placements during 2015-16 for males (33 out of 46 placements)

- Two-thirds of Children's Home placements during 2015-16 for disabled children (31 out of 46 placements; 67%)

- Majority of Children's Homes placements during 2015-16 located 20 miles or further from home address (31out of 46 placements; 67%)

7.6 What we will do

- We will explore the reasons for our increase in the use of Children's Homes

- We will review all existing young people placed in Children's Homes with a view to considering step down arrangements through our new Placements Panel

- With a new Children's Home opening in Merton, we have put our plan to create a Business Case to progress the procurement of a Children's Home within Merton on hold. We will work closely with this new provider so that we are able to meet the needs of our young people in a high quality commissioned service in the local area.

- In addition, we will work with existing and new providers within 5 miles of Merton to develop closer commissioning relationships.

- We will continue to work with providers to ensure quality and best value of placements though regular quality assurance visits and robust fee negotiations both on placement and at key points during changes in service delivery.

- We will be proactive in working in consortium arrangements to consider smarter ways of commissioning placements

- Merton is represented on the London Care Placements Fee negotiations panel and will continue to drive to maintain standard, costs and to identify new possible providers near to the borough.

- We will develop new consortium working arrangements with colleagues through LCP to ensure best practice in the field of commissioning residential children's homes placements

8. 16+ years of age semi-independent accommodation (SIA)

8.1 Introduction

16+ years Semi-independent accommodation enables some young people aged 16 and 17 years to transition to independence at age 18 years. The needs assessment of the young person by their social worker, and the Pathway Plan will identify if this is appropriate and suitable for the young person, and this will be reviewed at the statutory review, chaired by the young person's Independent Reviewing Officer. This provision is not subject to Children's Homes Regulations, and is not inspected by Ofsted. Merton has few young people aged 16 and 17 years in this provision. It can have a very valuable contribution to make to the growth into independence for some young people. Accommodation is usually a private house with 3 or 4 young people resident, with key worker support from staff on-site throughout the day, ranging from a few hours to 24 hour support. SIA placements are usually far more costly than in-house fostering.

Merton is committed to the placement stability and security of the young people aged 16 and 17 years in its care and only uses a SIA placement when this is in the best interests of the young person to do so. Recognising that it can be a valuable means of enabling some young people to transition to independence as they desire, it is important that Merton obtains the range and standard of accommodation needed at a reasonable cost.

8.2 Number, gender and ethnicity of young people in SIA

There has been a five percentage point increase in the proportion of males placed in Semi-Independent 16+ placements. Just over two-thirds of Semi-Independent placements are used by males (42 out of 61 placements; 69%).
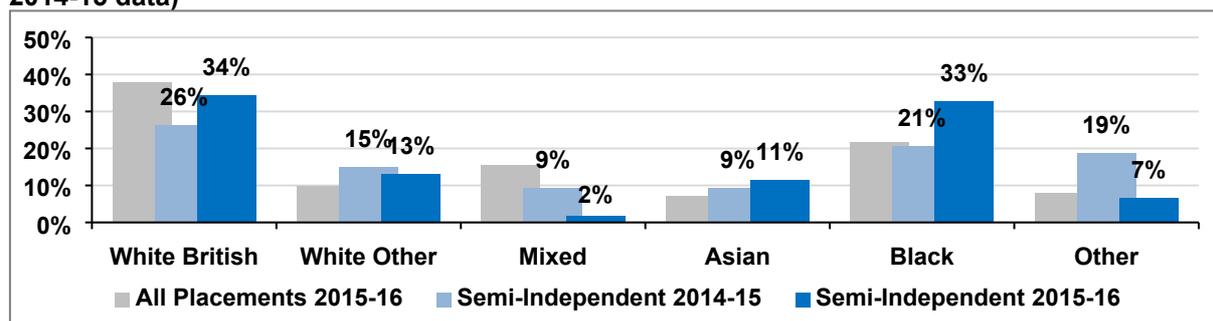
Table 17: Number and percentage of Semi-Independent 16+ placements by gender during 2015-16 (against 2014-15 data)

Placement Demographics		16+ Semi-Independent Provision (2014-15)			16+ Semi-Independent Provision (2015-16)		
		No. of children	No. of placements	% of placements	No. of children	No. of placements	% of placements
Gender	Male	29	34	64%	33	42	69%
	Female	14	19	36%	13	19	31%
Total		43	53	100%	46	61	100%

Source: SSDA903 2014-15 & 2015-16

A higher proportion of Semi-Independent 16+ placements are being used by young people from White British and Black backgrounds than the previous financial year. There has been a notable decrease of young people from "Other" ethnicity backgrounds (down 12 percentage points from 2014-15) (Table 18).

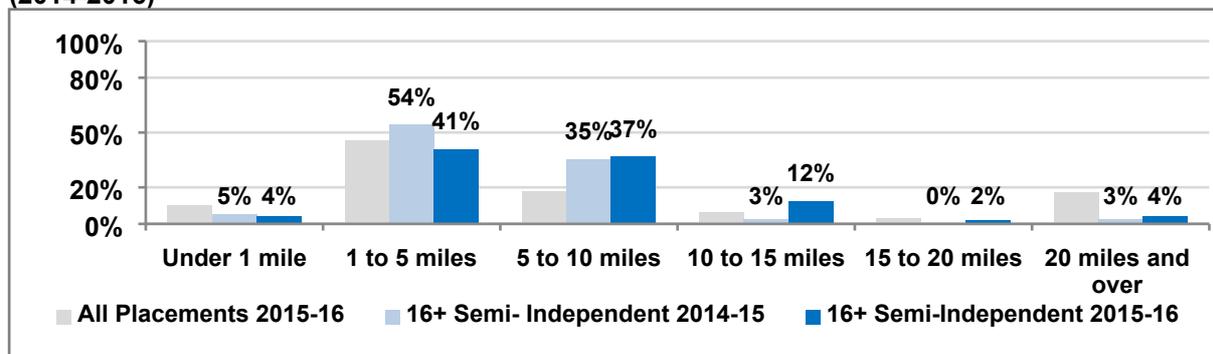**Table 18: Percentage of Semi-Independent 16+ placements by ethnicity during 2015-16 (against 2014-15 data)**

Source: SSDA903 2014-15 & 2015-16

8.3 Semi-Independent 16+ provision – Placement Distance

There has been a 12 percentage point decrease in the proportion of Semi-Independent 16+ placements situated within 10 miles of the young person's home address (82% in 2015-16 compared to 94% in 2014-15).

Table 19: Percentage of 16+ Semi-Independent placements by placement distance from home (2014-2016)

Source: SSDA903 2014-15 & 2015-16

8.4 Semi-Independent 16+ provision – Placement Stability

Table 20: Number and percentage of Semi-Independent 16+ placements by placement length (Open as at 31 March and ceased during the year)

Placement Demographics		16+ Semi-Independent Provision (2014-15)			16+ Semi-Independent Provision (2015-16)		
		No. of children	No. of placements	% of placements	No. of children	No. of placements	% of placements
Placement length (Open placements as at 31 March)	Less than 1 month	1	1	8%	2	2	13%
	1 to 3 months	1	1	8%	7	7	44%
	3 to 6 months	3	3	23%	3	3	19%
	6 to 12 months	8	8	62%	4	4	25%
	1 to 2 years	0	0	0%	0	0	0%
	2 years or more	0	0	0%	0	0	0%
Total		**13**	**13**	**100%**	**16**	**16**	**100%**

Placement length (Ceased placements during year)	Less than 1 month	7	7	18%	8	12	27%
	1 to 3 months	5	6	15%	11	13	29%
	3 to 6 months	7	7	18%	9	9	20%
	6 to 12 months	15	16	40%	8	8	18%
	1 to 2 years	4	4	10%	3	3	7%
	2 years or more	0	0	0%	0	0	0%
Total (no duplicates)		31	40	100%	33	45	100%

Source: SSDA903 2014-15 & 2015-16

8.5 What this data tells us

We have had a small increase in our looked after young people using semi-independent provision, but a significant number of increased placements because of moves and transfers for a variety of reasons. Most of our young people in this accommodation live outside of Merton as there is limited availability from private agencies within the borough. However, availability is growing. As with young people placed in Children's Homes, looked after young people placed in semi-independent provision may need to be placed away from Merton or other areas for their own protection. Increasingly young people are identifying areas where they do not feel safe because of CSE or gang connections and this has led to moves into different areas, sometimes at some distance.

Key Findings: 16+ Semi-Independent Provision

- 61 Semi-Independent placements during 2015-16 (15% of all placements during 2015-16)

- 16 Children in Semi-Independent placements as at 31 March 2016

- Majority of 16+ Semi-Independent placements during 2015-16 for children aged 17 years old at start of placement (49 out of 61 placements; 80%)

- 97% of 16+ Semi-Independent placements during 2015-16 located outside of Merton local authority boundary (59 out of 61 placements). Although 82% were located within 10 miles of their home address (40 out of 49 placements matched)

- Three-quarters of Looked After Children in 16+ Semi-Independent Provision as at 31 March 2016 had been in the same placement for less than six months (12 out of 16 children; 75%)

8.6 What we will do

- We will review our use of the semi-independent market for our looked after young people and care leavers to ensure that use of this provision is time-limited and is used as a step into independent living.

- We will continue to work closely with well-developed semi-independent and housing providers to enable them to support young people remaining within Merton including Grenfell who has recently (September 2016) opened a semi-independent unit in Merton for young people aged 16+

- We will continue to embed our financial framework with providers to ensure that we are getting best value for placements made.
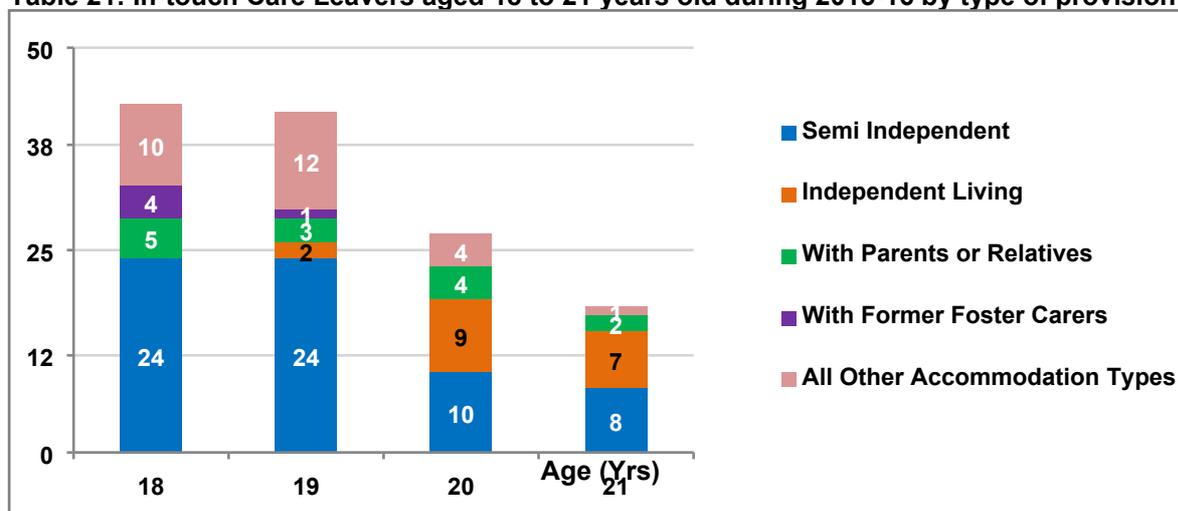

9. Care Leavers

9.1 Introduction

There were 150 care leavers aged 18 to 21 years old during 2015-16, 130 of whom, a very high number, were maintaining their contact with Merton Children's Services. The 20 care leavers did not wish to stay in touch for various reasons, including no longer requiring a service from the council, or from personal choice; only 3 care leavers could not be contacted despite the attempts of Children's Services.

9.2 Suitability of accommodation

93% of care leavers aged 18 to 21 during 2015-16 were suitably accommodated . This figure is impacted by the five care leavers in custody, as this cannot be included as suitable accommodation. Table 21 shows the accommodation by type. Two-thirds of In-touch care leavers during 2015-16 were aged either 18 or 19 years old (85 of 130 in-touch care leavers; 65%). The majority of 18 and 19 year old care leavers were residing in semi-independent placements on their birthday during 2015-16, with five 18 to 19 year olds staying put with former foster carers. Whilst there were fewer 20 and 21 year old care leavers, a higher proportion of them were residing in Independent Living placements.

Table 21: In-touch Care Leavers aged 18 to 21 years old during 2015-16 by type of provision

Source: SSDA903 2015-16

Table 22 shows that 68% of care leavers aged 18 to 21 years during 2015-16 were in Education, Training or Employment and the majority of these were in full time education. All those 'Staying Put' with former foster carers during 2015-16 (Five Care Leavers) were in full time ETE at point of contact, with the majority of those in Independent Living placements and those who moved back with parents or relatives also in some form of employment. There was a higher proportion of In-touch care leavers reported as Not in Education, Employment or Training for 16+ Semi-Independent placements.

Table 22: Stacked bar graph showing the activity status of In-Touch care leavers aged 18 to 21 years old during 2015-16 by type of provision
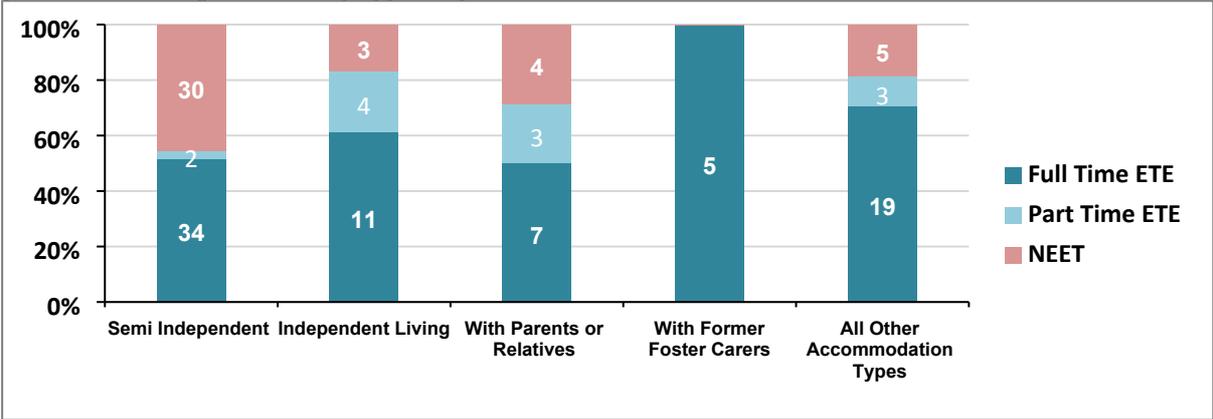
Source: SSDA903 2015-16

9.3 What this data tells us

Merton is consistent in its offer to support young people to develop the skills needed to enable them to live independently, delivering independence courses for young people to prepare them for living on their own. This has resulted in a large number of young people continuing to access the semi-independent provider market. The needs of this group of young people needs urgent review with a view to considering alternative provision which will better support them towards independence and reduce the significant financial cost to the Council.

Most of our 20 and 21 year olds who continue to live in semi-independent accommodation are asylum seeking young people in the process of applying for leave to remain in the UK. Some have remained in this accommodation whilst awaiting a permanent housing option. There are times when this does cause some delay as our housing market is limited.

Our Care leaver offer to young people is good with 87% still in touch with Merton CSF. As would be expected, the number of young people placed in semi-independent provision reduces as young people move into independent living. The number of young people living independently increases as young people gets older.

We will be increasing the numbers of our care leavers remaining with their former foster carers as Staying Put Arrangements as these can be very successful and supportive arrangements for care leavers; of our current care leavers in Staying Put Arrangements all are in education, employment, and training.

Key Findings: Care Leavers 2015-16

• 150 Care Leavers aged 18 to 21 years old during 2015-16

• 66 young people are using semi-independent provision (44% 66 out of 150)

• 87% of Care Leavers aged 18 to 21 were 'in touch' with Merton CSF (130 out of 150 Care Leavers)

• 93% of 'In-touch' Care Leavers aged 18 to 21 residing in suitable accommodation at point of contact (121 out of 130 In-touch Care Leavers)

• Majority of In-touch 18 and 19 year old care leavers residing in 16+ Semi-Independent provision at point of contact.

9.4 What will we do?

- We will continue to embed our financial framework with providers to ensure that we are getting best value for placements made.

- We will work closely with Providers who can offer temporary housing for our young people

- We will aim to work more closely with colleagues in C&H to access the Shared Lives Scheme where appropriate for our most vulnerable young people and care leavers

- We will work to develop alternative provision for our care leavers to increase options through other sources to support young people towards independence and impact on the Council's current expenditure.

- We will work closely with our Housing colleagues to ensure we use our quota of Housing for our young people in a timely way where appropriate and that our young people can step down into independent living when it is appropriate for them to do so.

10. Placements and what we do well

10.1 Demand management

Merton's rate of children looked after per 10,000 population has remained stable over the last five years (between 30-34 LAC per 10,000 population). We remain within range of our comparable statistical neighbours and low compared to London and National benchmarks.

Actual numbers of children in care each year has risen by 28% over the last five years from 213 children in 2011/12 to 273 children in 2015/16. This has placed additional demands on our placement budget.

We have alleviated some of this additional demand by recruiting 46 sets of foster carers over the same period with 13 new fully approved in house foster carers in 2015/16. In addition we had 4 sets of connected persons foster carers approved on a temporary basis in 2015/16 and one family approved as Foster for Adoption carers, allowing them to take a baby from birth initially as a foster placement and eventually for permanence via adoption.

The reasons for the increase in Looked after Children are complex but include heightened national awareness of children's safeguarding, an increasing birth rate and more general demographic changes.

So far as practicable in all circumstances the authority is required to find a placement for each Looked after Child which;
- Distance:
  - Is near the child's home;
  - Is within the local authority's area, unless that is not reasonably practicable
- Siblings: Enables the child to live with an accommodated sibling;
- Education: Does not disrupt his/her education or training;
- Health: Allows children and young people to continue to access local health provision
- Equalities: Where the child is disabled, is suitable to meet the needs of that child;

During 2015/16, Merton made 410 placements for 273 looked after children.

Of the children that were placed in provision with an Ofsted judgement, 92% were placed in Good or Outstanding provision. (31st March 2016, 134 out of 145 children)
- Outstanding - 7% of children placed (10 children)
- Good – 85% of children placed (124 children)
- Requires improvement/adequate – 8% of children placed (11 children)
- Inadequate – 0% (0 children)

10.2   Distance

There are two nationally reported measures associated to placement distance, 'percentage placed in and out of borough and percentage placed over 20 miles'.
- Of all our placements made 17% were over 20 miles away (up one percentage point compared to 2014/15)
- Of all our children placed 32% were placed in borough, although this seems low we are a small borough and this increases the challenge to provide placements within the borough boundary
- In fact 56% of children were placed within 5 miles of their home address and 74% were placed within 10 miles. 35% of our in-house foster carers are not based in Merton (25 out of 72)
- We recruited 13 new foster carer families in 2015/16. All are within 5 miles of Merton and 9 were approved to offer placements to teenagers (a key need identified in our last plan).

Looked after children live away from their home authority for many reasons; Some need to be out of area to help keep them safe from dangerous influences closer to home. Others need the kind of specialist support that is not available in all local authority areas. Some looked after children are moved out so that they can live with brothers and sisters, or be cared for by relatives who are approved as foster carers. Some are placed in adoptive or permanent fostering arrangements with the aim of enabling them to achieve stability for the rest of their childhood.

We are committed to good placement stability, therefore where we place a child in Agency Foster Care Provision if the child is settled and happy we may decide not to remove them in spite of the cost implications to the authority. During 2015/16, 17 of our looked after children were placed for adoption with permanent families outside of Merton. In this instance, distance from Merton is not the most significant factor as adoption will enable them to become permanent members of a family elsewhere. Five looked after children were placed in hospital and seven within the criminal justice system. There are no secure units or young offender's institutions within the area and NHS England has limited resources for young people with acute mental health difficulties. There are also no residential schools in borough and we had four children placed outside of Merton in stable residential placements.

Table 23: Placement Distance from Home for all placements during 2015-16 by type of placement[9]
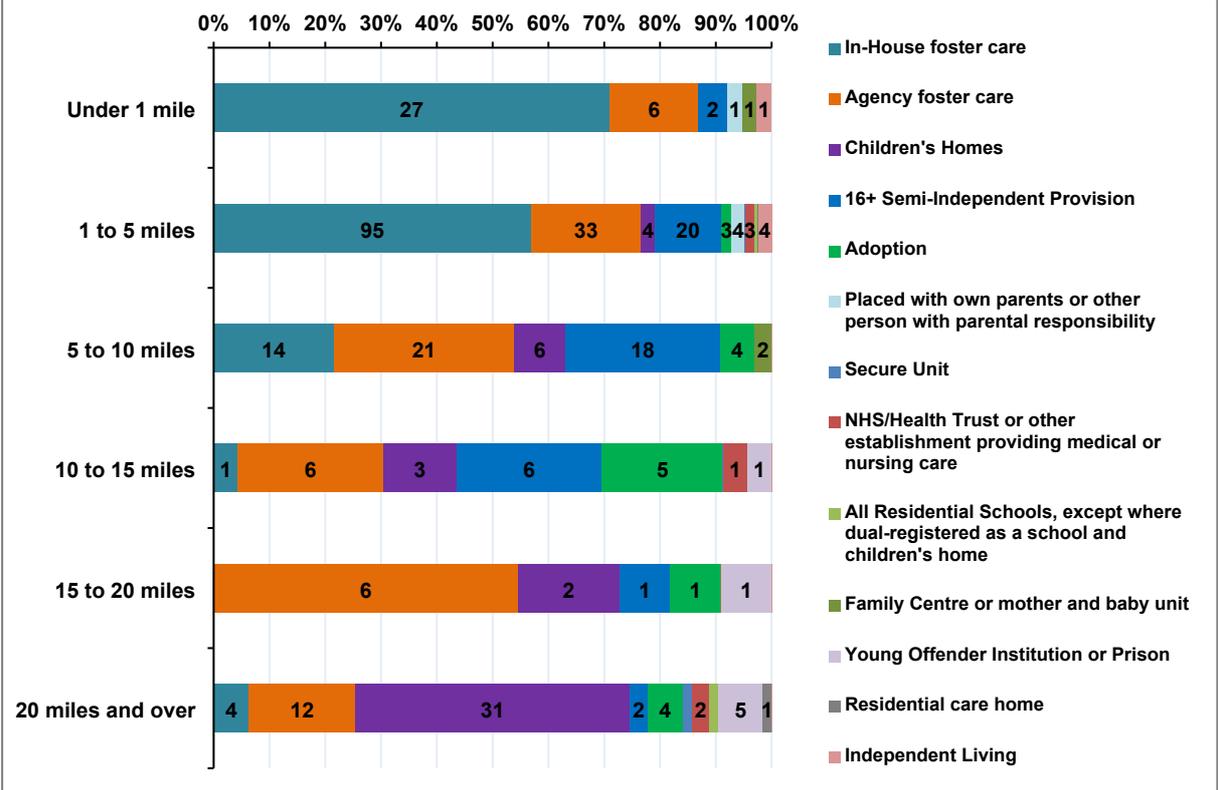
Source: SSDA903 2015/16

We can see from the graph above that the further away placements are the more specialist they tend to be and thus able to meet the needs of our most complex children.

10.3 Sibling groups

We are required to enable children to live with their siblings where it is in the best interest of the children involved. We have successfully targeted previous In-house foster carer recruitment campaigns to attract foster carers willing to take family groups.

- During 2015/16, of the 273 children looked after, 80 belonged to 33 siblings groups.
- 67% of the sibling groups were placed together (22 out of 33 sibling groups).
- 14 of the sibling groups were placed together within 5 miles of their home (out of 22 sibling groups placed together; 64%)
- 82% of sibling groups were placed together within 10 miles of home (18 out of 22 sibling groups placed together)

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[9] Excludes 43 placements where home address was not available – cases relating to UASC and those with no fixed abode

- 43% of our In-House task based foster carers are approved to take sibling groups (25 out of 58 task based foster carers)

10.4 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 looked after children placed both within and outside of Merton to support them with all aspects of their education.
- The ART placement 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. Additional 90% felt the child placed with them attended a school which was good or excellent.
- One in six placements is for children or young people with either Statements of Special Educational Needs or Education, Health and Care Plan (17% of placements; 44 children). The majority of these have a primary need of either SEMH (Social, Emotional and Mental Health) or ASD (Autistic Spectrum Disorder).

10.5 Health

We know that when we move children a long way from Merton, they have more difficulty in accessing specialist health services.
- We have a protocol in place to ensure that our looked after children are able to access mental health services in a timely way where necessary if they are placed outside of Merton
- Our dedicated LAC CAMHS team offers a specialist service to our looked after children and young people
- Our looked after children's nurse maintains contact with all looked after children, both within and outside of Merton

10.6 Equalities and disabilities

Merton's LAC gender distributions are similar to national averages, in that we (as nationally) have more boys than girls in care. However, there is still an over-representation of boys in our care compared to nationally (63% of Merton LAC are boys compared to 56% nationally as at 31 March 2016). Merton also has an over representation of older children in care, 40% of our LAC are aged 16 and over compared to 23% nationally (as at the 31st Match 2016).

Drilling down we are able to evidence that a significant number of the boys in our care are teenagers. In fact 69% of our over 16s (as at 31 March 2016) are boys, 19 of whom are Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers. Other reasons for supporting such a large group of teenagers in Merton include breakdown of family relationships and a group of young people who become looked after by being remanded into the criminal justice system.

The majority of all placements made during 2015-16 were for children aged 12 or over (252 out of 410 placements; 61%), maintaining good levels of suitable provision for teenagers remains a key priority. There are fewer White, Asian or Asian British children looked after than the "all persons" Merton population. Mixed ethnic backgrounds, Black or Black British heritage and 'other ethnic groups' have looked after children proportions greater than the resident population. Nearly two-thirds of all placements during 2015-16 were for children from Black and Minority Ethnic Backgrounds (255 out of 410 placements; 62%).

One in four placements were commissioned to care for disabled looked after children (106 out of 410 placements; 26%).

10.7 User Voice

Our User Voice Strategy states that we have the highest ambitions for all our children and young people, and that we judge our success by a range of criteria including being able to demonstrate that the views and ambitions of children and young people have informed and improved our service offer.

Each year looked after children and care leavers are involved in a broad range of participation and consultation activities. This is in line with our 'pledge'[10] to LAC and care leavers to provide opportunities for feedback and to provide advocacy to support effective participation. The feedback from this activity is collated as part of the 'sufficiency statement' needs analysis because it provides insight and intelligence on providing the right placement, including access to education and health services, which facilitates placement stability and improved outcomes for children and young people.

During 2015/16 the following 'User voice' activity took place:

1. Participation in LAC Reviews.
2. Independent Reviewing Officer consultation events on LAC reviews.
3. Young People's views on placements report.
4. LAC and Care Leavers' 'Pledge' review.
5. Foster Carers' Survey.
6. Looked after children involved in foster carer training.
7. Young people's feedback to the Access to Resources Team on accommodation.
8. Care Leavers' Survey.
9. LAC Health Needs Assessment.

Views relevant to the sufficiency assessment are detailed in Appendix E

10.8   Fostering

Research shows that children usually thrive from being part of a family group and for this reason, we consider fostering as a first option for our looked after children. We remain committed to improving our number of in house carers to ensure best choice and value to the Council. In 2015/16 we:
* Recruited 13 new fully approved mainstream foster carer families within 5 miles of Merton, 9 of whom are approved to offer placements to teenagers
* In addition we approved 4 sets of connected persons foster carers on a temporary basis and one family approved as Foster for Adoption carers, allowing them to take a baby from birth initially as a foster placement and eventually for permanence via adoption.
* Undertook 5 preparation training groups for prospective foster carers
* Continued to involve our looked after young people and care leavers in delivering preparation training for our prospective foster carers and being involved in the assessment process

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[10] LAC and Care Leavers Pledge 2016

- Continued with targeted fostering recruitment campaigns to meet the needs of our young people based on the Sufficiency Strategy 2015/16
- Followed a good quality tracking processes to ensure we are providing suitable care to young people who need this
- Embedded a Staying Put policy to enable our young people to remain in their placements post 18, including those placed with agency foster carers.
- Embedded our specialist CAMHS posts to offer support to looked after children
- Reviewed the approval range of our foster carers to reflect maximum use of their skills and experience

10.9 Children's Homes

There are a small number of young people for whom it will be difficult to provide stability through a family based placement. In 2015/16 we have:
- Worked closely with existing providers to ensure best quality and value for money
- Formed links with a new provider who has now (September 2016) opened a new Children's Home in Merton
- Continued to consider options around procuring a Children's Home in Merton
- Embedded tracking processes to ensure we are using Children's Homes placements for the right young people
- Improved planning to step young people down into fostering and semi-independent provision where appropriate.

10.10 Semi-Independent Provision

For young people aged 16+, semi-independent provision offers a level of independence and can support young people prior to a move into independent living. We have been keen to develop links in this area and, as this is an unregulated market, we have a duty to ensure good quality as well as best value. During 2015/16 we have:
- Embedded a financial framework for providers of semi-independent accommodation
- Embedded a quality assurance framework to ensure quality of provision
- Worked with specific providers of semi-independent and housing provision (Grenfell Housing and Notting Hill Housing Trust) to develop new provision within Merton and to increase the menu of options of for care leavers
- Linked with the Shared Lives programme run in C&H to agree access to the service for vulnerable Care Leavers.
- Embedded tracking processes to ensure we are using the placement we commission to continue to meet the needs of our young people and care leavers and support them towards independent living.
- Worked closely with colleagues in C&H to improve the access that our care leavers need to a permanent tenancy for their own properties when they are ready.

10.11 Commissioning

As well as direct work with providers, in 2015/16 we have:
- Continued to work with colleagues in London Care Placements to drive down costs for placements, establish best value and ensure good quality for placements
- Through involvement in the South London SEN commissioning consortium, set up a dynamic purchasing system (DPS) to ensure more efficient commissioning of independent school placements.

- Undertaken preliminary work within consortium arrangements to widen the DPS functionality to include commissioning of care placements for looked after children and acre leavers

11 Budget Information

Placements are procured from the private and independent sectors; residential homes; secure accommodation; mother and baby units and semi-independent accommodation. Some education costs for LAC are met from a separate education budget. In 2015-16, the LAC placement budget was overspent by £1,433,000. This pressure was mitigated by robust negotiations with providers and by contributions from the local CCG for children with medical needs. A detailed breakdown of expenditure is contained in Appendix F. Budget pressures continue in the current year and this Sufficiency Statement and the aim of the Placement Quality and Improvement Plan is to achieve better value for Merton and a reduction in cost through improved management of placement capacity both in-house and in the private sector

Appendix A - All Placements during 2014-15 and 2015-16 by key factors

Placement Demographics		All placements (2014-15)			All Placements (2015-16)			Diff. (2014-15 to 2015-16)		
		No. of children	No. of placements	% of placements	No. of children	No. of placements	% of placements	No. of Children	No. of placements	% of placements
Age at placement start date	Under 1 year	18	26	7%	19	32	8%	1	6	1%
	1 to 4 years	26	39	10%	33	42	10%	7	3	0%
	5 to 11 years	64	82	22%	67	88	21%	3	6	0%
	12 to 15 years	78	104	28%	79	108	26%	1	4	-1%
	16 years and over	86	126	33%	87	140	34%	1	14	1%
Total (no duplicates)		255	377	100%	273	410	100%	18	33	0%
Gender	Male	159	231	61%	161	238	58%	2	7	-3%
	Female	96	146	39%	112	172	42%	16	26	3%
Total		255	377	100%	273	410	100%	18	33	0%
Ethnicity	White British	92	145	38%	100	155	38%	8	10	-1%
	White Other	23	26	7%	32	40	10%	9	14	3%
	Mixed	31	52	14%	39	64	16%	8	12	2%
	Asian	23	34	9%	18	29	7%	-5	-5	-2%
	Black	61	88	23%	58	89	22%	-3	1	-2%
	Other	25	32	8%	26	33	8%	1	1	0%
Total		255	377	100%	273	410	100%	18	33	0%
WB or BME	White British	92	145	38%	100	155	38%	8	10	-1%
	BME	163	232	62%	173	255	62%	10	23	1%
Total		255	377	100%	273	410	100%	18	33	0%
UASC	UASC	32	35	9%	32	42	10%	0	7	1%
	Non-UASC	223	342	91%	241	368	90%	18	26	-1%
Total		255	377	100%	273	410	100%	18	33	0%
Location	Merton	106	121	32%	112	130	32%	6	9	0%
	Other LA	185	256	68%	198	280	68%	13	24	0%
Total (no duplicates)		255	377	100%	273	410	100%	18	33	0%
Placement Distance (exc. children with no stated home address)	Under 1 mile	45	47	14%	36	38	10%	-9	-9	-4%
	1 to 5 miles	120	154	46%	129	167	46%	9	13	0%
	5 to 10 miles	48	52	15%	57	65	18%	9	13	2%
	10 to 15 miles	15	18	5%	19	23	6%	4	5	1%
	15 to 20 miles	11	11	3%	11	11	3%	0	0	0%
	20 miles and over	42	54	16%	53	63	17%	11	9	1%
Total (no duplicates)		218	336	100%	241	367	100%	23	31	0%
Placement length (Open placements as at 31 March)	Less than 1 month	14	14	9%	15	15	9%	1	1	0%
	1 to 3 months	20	20	13%	27	27	17%	7	7	4%
	3 to 6 months	25	25	16%	24	24	15%	-1	-1	-1%
	6 to 12 months	44	44	28%	36	36	22%	-8	-8	-6%
	1 to 2 years	37	37	24%	28	28	17%	-9	-9	-6%
	2 years or more	17	17	11%	33	33	20%	16	16	9%
Total		157	157	100%	163	163	100%	6	6	0%
Placement length (Ceased placements during year)	Less than 1 month	54	63	29%	62	83	34%	8	20	5%
	1 to 3 months	24	26	12%	35	37	15%	11	11	3%
	3 to 6 months	36	37	17%	37	43	17%	1	6	1%
	6 to 12 months	50	55	25%	43	45	18%	-7	-10	-7%
	1 to 2 years	30	30	14%	26	26	11%	-4	-4	-3%
	2 years or more	9	9	4%	13	13	5%	4	4	1%
Total (no duplicates)		155	220	100%	176	247	100%	21	27	0%
Statemented SEN or EHC Plan	Yes - Statemented or EHC Plan				44	68	17%			
	Not Statemented/ without EHC Plan				229	342	83%			
Total					273	410	100%			

Appendix B - Background information

Merton the place

Merton is an outer London borough situated in south west London, covering 14.7 square miles. Merton has a total population of 200,543 including 47,499 children and young people aged 0-19 (Census 2011). The number of 0-19 year olds is forecast to increase by 3,180 (7%) by 2017, within which we forecast a 20% increase of children aged 5 to 9 (2,270 CYP). We have a younger population than the England average and have seen a 39% net increase of births over the last ten years (2,535 births in 2002 rising to 3,521 in 2010). The birth rate reduced in 2012/13 and again slightly in 2013/14 suggesting that the rate is stabilising. However the last ten years alongside other demographic factors has placed additional demand on all children's services.

Predominantly suburban in character, Merton is divided into 20 wards and has three main town centres; Wimbledon, Mitcham and Morden. A characteristic of the borough is the difference between the more deprived east (Mitcham/Morden) and the more affluent west (Wimbledon).

There are a number of pockets of deprivation within the borough mainly in the eastern wards and some smaller pockets in the central wards. These wards have multiple deprivation, with high scores on income deprivation, unemployment and limited educational attainment.

Figure X: Map of Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index Merton (IDACI 2015) *Source: IDACI 2015*

Since 2011 we have seen an increase of 15% of children who are eligible for free school meals (2011, 3309 FSM children, 2016, 3817 FSM children).

Thirty five per cent of Merton's total population is Black, Asian or Minority ethnic (BAME) - this is expected to increase further to 39% by 2017. Pupils in Merton schools are more diverse still, with 67% from BAME communities, 44% with a first language which is not English, speaking over 124 languages (Census 2016).
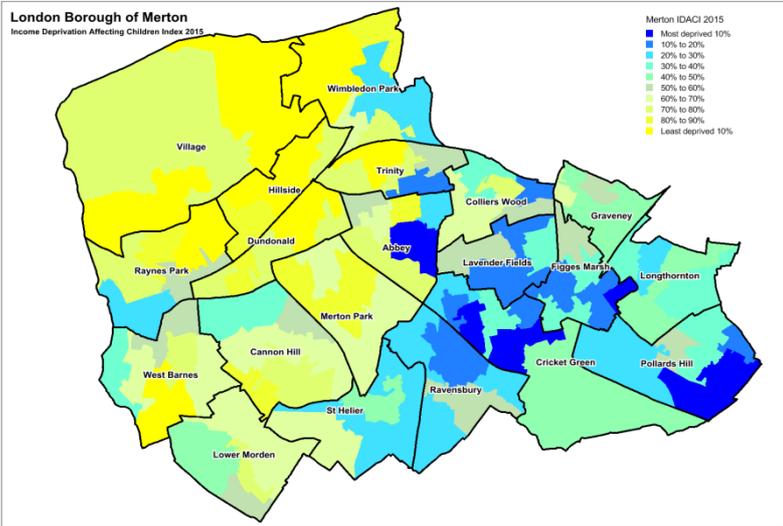
The borough has concentrations of Urdu speaking communities, Sri Lankan, South African and Polish residents. The most prominent first languages for pupils apart from English are Polish 6.1%, Urdu 5.7% and Tamil 5.6% (Census 2016). The number of pupils in Merton schools with Special Educational Needs is also increasing, with SEN statements/EHC plans rising from 922 in January 2011 to 1148 in January 2016 (an increase of 25%).

Appendix C - Merton's Strategic Framework and Governance

Merton's Sufficiency Statement informs our strategic plans, commissioning, and procurement functions.

Our Children and Young People's Plan[11] sets out our ambitions for all our children and particularly those most vulnerable to poorer outcomes. The Looked After Children Strategy and the Care Leavers Strategy, which are both endorsed by the Children's Trust, the Merton Safeguarding Children's Board, and the Corporate Parenting Board, provide further focus for our collective ambitions.
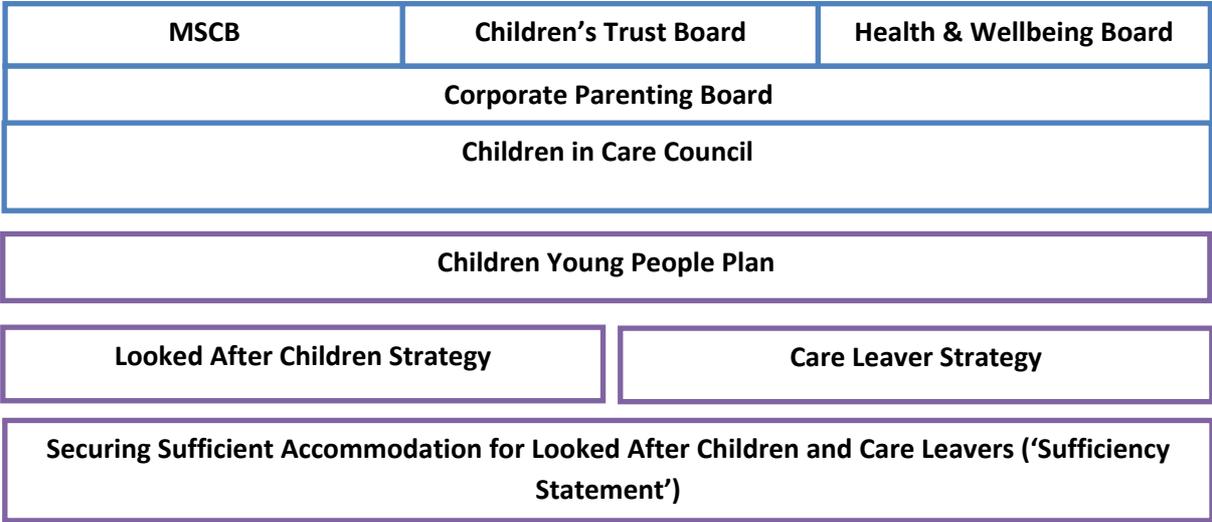
Looked After Children Strategy - strategic priorities:

1. Improving the **timeliness of care proceedings**
2. Improving **placement stability and choice**
3. Improving **educational outcomes** for Looked After Children
4. Supporting good **health outcomes** for Looked After Children
5. Encouraging **participation and positive activities**
6. Understanding the needs of and supporting **LAC in particular circumstance**
7. **Achieving permanency**
8. Supporting our **care leavers** *(see below Care Leavers Strategy)*

Care Leavers Strategy – key objectives:

- To motivate and assist each young person to reach their potential for **education, training and employment** so that they can achieve independence.
- To promote their **good health** by encouraging a healthy sexual, emotional and physical lifestyle.
- To facilitate and support them in **suitable accommodation**
- To help them to maintain **positive family and social/friendship relationships**
- To assist them to be **financially independent**, and be able to budget, and to save and manage their money.
- To provide them with an **allocated worker** to support them in their aspirations.

The Corporate Parenting Board is comprised of senior managers and officers from education, health, housing, social care and elected members, and is chaired by the Chief Executive of the London Borough Merton. The board ensures a high level of scrutiny and cross directorate responsibility for the delivery of our priorities.

MSCB	Children's Trust Board	Health & Wellbeing Board
Corporate Parenting Board		
Children in Care Council		

Children Young People Plan

Looked After Children Strategy	Care Leaver Strategy

Securing Sufficient Accommodation for Looked After Children and Care Leavers ('Sufficiency Statement')

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[11] Children and Young People's Plan 2016-19; www.merton.gov.uk/cypplan

Appendix D - Our Corporate Parenting responsibilities

The Children Act 1989 and the Leaving Care Act 2000 place clear statutory duties upon the Council to protect children from suffering significant harm and to provide continued financial and transition support to care leavers aged up to 21 (or 25 if in full time education).

When a child comes into care, the council becomes the Corporate Parent. Put simply, the term 'Corporate Parent' means the collective responsibility of the council, elected members, employees, and partner agencies, for providing the best possible care and safeguarding for the children who are looked after by the council. Effective corporate parenting requires knowledge and awareness of the needs of children and young people who are looked after and the services that they receive. This Sufficiency statement informs the Corporate Parenting board of the numbers, characteristics and needs of looked after children and care leavers and an analysis of how effectively Merton is serving it's looked after population through the provision of appropriate placements.

With these systems already in operation we are well placed to implement the new corporate parenting principles[12] in our work to support looked after children and care leavers.

Principles

Merton's services for Looked After Children form part of a comprehensive continuum of support for children and young people who may be facing difficulties at home. These range from family support, intensive community interventions, or permanent substitute care. In taking this approach we are committed to ensuring that the right children enter care and that their experiences are positive and opportunities many.

Services for Looked After children are delivered in accordance with the following principles:

- Act in the best interests and promote the health and well-being of the child or young person

- To help those children and young people gain access to, and make the best use of, services provided by the local authority and its relevant partners;

- to promote high aspirations, and seek to secure the best outcomes, for those children and young people

- Safeguarding children is the paramount consideration and levels of risk are always thoroughly assessed.
- To take into account the views, wishes and feelings of those children and young people. In terms of their experience of being cared for Looked After Children are the best experts we have, and we value their views. At every stage of planning, service delivery or change we will listen to what they say and act accordingly, providing access to advocacy support and an Independent Reviewing Officer.
- Alternatives to care will be considered before a child becomes looked after. This means ensuring that Merton's Early Intervention and Prevention processes and services effectively support families to prevent children from going into care.
- Services will offer support to families where a child has been returned to their care after being looked after for a period.
- Where a child does have to be cared for away from their family, placement decisions will be made on the basis of a thorough assessment of their needs.

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[12] Children and Social Work Bill 2016 pp. 1&2 – Corporate Parenting Principles.

- In this case, first consideration will be given to care provided through extended family or friends, and placement decisions will take into account the need to be near to family, friends and other support.
- We aim to make available the widest range of placements within or near Merton borough, in order to meet the individual needs of our Looked After Children, and to increase the chance of continuing in the same school, and having appropriate contact with their family and friends.
- Placement provision and placement planning will take into account children and young people's needs in terms of the equalities 'protected characteristics' – age, disability, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.
- Once a decision is made to look after a child this will be for as short a period as possible taking into account their best interests
- Decisions to find alternative and permanent placements for the child will be made within the shortest possible timescales.
- Where a child cannot go home, planning for permanence will always include consideration of adoption, special guardianship or child arrangement orders, thus reducing the role of the state in children's lives
- Where children remain looked after long-term, the overall aim will be to replicate the stability and level of care that any good parent would provide to their child, so as to give the child every chance of success.

Appendix E - User Voice

The following is a summary of the key messages from this year's user voice activity, under the themes which inform our strategy to provide sufficient accommodation to meet the needs of looked after children in their community:

- Providing the right placements for looked after children.
- Supporting Merton foster carers to provide the right placement.
- Placements/accommodation, stability and finances for care leavers.
- Access to education, training and employment (ETE) for care leavers.
- Access to support for health and wellbeing.

Providing the right placements for looked after children

We are committed to supporting children and young people to give their views on their care plan, including placements, and to act on this feedback. This contributes to ensuring that we provide the right placement which meets the child's needs. During 2015/16 we have gathered this feedback in a range of ways:

Participation in LAC Reviews - In 2015/16 90% of looked after children participated in their LAC review either through attendance, completion of consultation papers, or through an advocate. This has been supported by giving looked after children access to the Jigsaw 4u **advocacy service** which, case studies from the service show, have had a positive impact on outcomes:

> - Young people enabled to participate in decisions that affect them and increased understanding of the care system and care status for young people.
>
> - Young people self-reported 'feeling listened to'.
>
> - Increased contact with family members and improving family relationships including establishing written agreements between young people and parents/carers.
>
> - Contribution to overall partnership care plans including maintaining access to CAMHS services and onward referral to other services such as Jigsaw Missing services, Young Carers, and Domestic Violence support services.

Independent Reviewing Officer consultation events on LAC reviews - During a series of consultation sessions with the IRO Service looked after children fed back that they want to feel that they are at the **centre of the review meeting and have a strong influence in shaping their care plan.** In response to this the IRO Service is adopting a good practice model which supports this approach to reviews**.**

The **Young People's views on placements** report gives an overview on what young people **consider to be good quality placements**:

> Carers or staff: are appropriate for the role; have access to initial and on-going training and practice support; listen to and empathise with the needs of looked after children including their need to feel safe; allow privacy, and appropriate levels of independence; can support the child's access to positive/ fun activities in and outside of the home; and are aware of the importance of the child's on-going link to their family, including managing contact, and cultural background.

LAC and Care Leavers' Pledge Review - At a special event to review Merton's 'pledge' to LAC and Care Leavers, the children and young people in attendance identified the priority themes and 'pledge' statements which are now in the new document. With reference to placement/ accommodation stability the new pledge now includes promises to provide support in the following areas: **safety and support -** including placement choice and maintaining positive relationships with family; and **finances** - including information on benefits and budgeting, as well as preparation for work and independence. A further priority which will be taken forward as an area for possible development includes ensuring that all accommodation has internet access.

Supporting foster carers to provide the right placements

We are committed to ensuring that foster carers are given appropriate support and information to ensure that they can provide a placement which meets the child's needs. Feedback from carers on this support includes the following:

The **Foster Carers' Survey -** gathered feedback from foster carers on recruitment, retention and support services delivered to them by our fostering service. They were very positive about the support of the fostering services with 100% saying that they would recommend fostering in Merton. The survey identified the following **areas for improvement**:

- Carers who took children outside of their approval age range (18% of respondents) identified the need for an improved level of support.

- Improve the quality of referral information that the foster carer receives and ensure that placement plans are available in a timely manner.

- Improve financial support especially retainer payments

Looked after children involved in foster carer preparation training - This focuses on feeding back to foster carers the experience of being a child in care. The following is an example of one carer's response to the training:

"I have a far better idea from a foster child's perspective, of what things really help/hinder building trust. Good to know about setting clear boundaries initially, like setting out that anything bought into the house needs a receipt or adult permission. Incredibly helpful session. Learnt so much. Was great to get things from the young people's perspective'.

Placements/accommodation, stability and finances for care leavers

We value feedback from young care leavers about their experience of accessing appropriate accommodation which offers stability, and which they can manage in terms of finances and independent living skills. We act on this feedback to make positive developments to services. During 2015/16 we have gathered feedback in a range of ways:

Young people's feedback to the Access to Resources Team on accommodation

Young people at the Children in Care Council themed meeting on **housing** were able to feedback to the Access to Resources Team, information about their needs in terms of appropriate placements. They requested**: more choice, more information about the types of placements available, and placements which are close to education**. In addition a **housing officer** was able to give young people clear information about the housing

application process including managing expectations by giving the facts about social housing supply and demand.

Care Leavers' Survey

The majority of the young people who responded to survey (67%) were living in semi-independent placements reflecting the overall care leaver population. Ninety three per cent stated that they receive an **appropriate level of support** from children's services in respect of **housing needs**, and only 20% stated that they lacked clarity in respect of the housing offer in Merton. Sixty eight per cent felt they had been **offered choice in terms of accommodation** and the **majority felt very safe**, and none felt unsafe, in their accommodation. Seventy per cent stated they were aware of their **financial entitlements**, and the majority were receiving these on time. All respondents stated they have a **bank or savings account** and 70% had seen a **Benefits Maximisation Officer** as part of their Pathway Plan review. Eighty three per cent stated that they were **aware of the Independent Living Skills (ILS) workshops** and 65% had attended the sessions including those on **finances and cooking on a budget**.

> As a result of this feedback we will **develop a Housing Pathways/Accommodation offer document**; implement an annual review of the '**Financial Provision'** document and circulate to all; and ensure that information on the **ILS training**, and the **'My Guide'** goes to all young people.

Access to education, training and employment (ETE) for care leavers

We are committed to providing support to care leavers on their education, and to access training and apprenticeships. This support contributes to young people being happy in their placement, thus promoting placement stability. Feedback from care leavers on this support includes the following:

Care Leavers' Survey - Ninety five per cent of respondents to the survey stated that they had discussed **education, employment and training as part of their pathway plan review**. Since November 2015 an ETE practitioner based in the in the Virtual School has been delivering **one to one and group work with care leavers at risk of not engaging with ETE**. Thirty per cent of respondents to the survey said that they were aware of this new support role, and 60% were aware of the role of the Virtual School.

> As a result of this feedback we will develop an ETE pathway and entitlements document, and ensure that the LAC and Care Leaver website is developed to support on-going communication and sharing of information.

Access to support for health and well-being

We are also committed to providing support to care leavers on their health and well-being including advice, information and support. This support also contributes to the young person's overall level of satisfaction and promotes stability. Feedback from care leavers on this support includes the following:

Care Leavers' Survey - Forty six per cent of respondents to the survey said that if they had a health problem they would go to the GP, and all but one said they were **registered with a GP**. Only 40% said they had received a copy of their **health summary**, so we are now working to ensure that all care leavers receive this information.

The **LAC Health needs assessment** gathered feedback from children and young people about three issues: young people's health care needs; accessing the child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS); and how young people are supported through transitions. While LAC and care leavers and their parents/ guardians placed within the borough reported being aware of how to access health services, **those placed out-of-borough identified that they need improved support to ensure that their needs are met**. In addition a number of young people felt that child and adolescent mental health workers do not adequately understand the particular needs or situation of looked after children.

> Recommendations have been made based on these issues and improvement work is being monitored by the Merton Clinical Commissioning Group and by the borough as corporate parents.

Appendix F - Budget Outturn 2015-16

Description	Budget (£)	March Outturn (£)
ART Independent Agency Foster	1,852,520	1,602,703
ART In-House Fostering	899,940	1,233,021
ART Residential Placements	2,246,160	2,515,377
ART Residential Secure accommodation	163,570	128,139
ART Residential Secure accommodation/Grant	-64,720	-64,720
ART Mother and Baby Unit	97,980	154,246
Total	**5,195,450**	**5,568,766**
Supported Lodging/Housing	749,820	1,395,229
Supported Housing (Housing Benefit Income)	-120,730	-220,183
Supported Lodging/Housing UACS(Non Grant)	60,070	368,387
Supported Lodging/Housing UACS(Grant)	194,590	94,356
Foster Care UACS (Grant)	91,770	397,247
Total	**975,520**	**2,035,036**
Grand Total	**6,170,970**	**7,603,902**

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