

London Borough of Merton Council

Inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers

and

Review of the effectiveness of the Local Safeguarding Children Board¹

Inspection date: 12 June 2017 to 6 July 2017

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Children's services in the London Borough of Merton are good.	
1. Children who need help and protection	Good
2. Children looked after and achieving permanence	Good
2.1 Adoption performance	Outstanding
2.2 Experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
3. Leadership, management and governance	Outstanding

¹ Ofsted produces this report under its power to combine reports in accordance with section 152 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. This report includes the report of the inspection of local authority functions carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 and the report of the review of the Local Safeguarding Children Board carried out under the Local Safeguarding Children Boards (Review) Regulations 2013.

Executive summary

Children in Merton benefit from services that are dynamic, ambitious and successful. Exceptional leadership and governance and strong frontline management ensure that children's services are consistently good. All children receive a good service and some receive an outstanding service. Inspectors saw that significant and sustained improvements had been achieved since the last inspection in 2012, when all services were judged as good. Staff are very effective in improving outcomes for children.

The director of children's services (DCS) and all senior leaders have created and sustained a highly effective culture of clear strategic planning alongside warmth and compassion for each and every child. The leadership style offers an ideal balance of rigorous attention to outcomes combined with sensitivity, humility and a sound understanding of the vulnerability experienced by children and their families. This was described by one partner as a 'productive and human way of working' that is both 'very respectful and challenging'.

Leaders and managers are highly visible and show care and concern for children and staff. They provide a strong culture of learning and a determination to improve further on outcomes that are already good. Innovative and creative thinking ensures that Merton achieves maximum impact from the resources available. This includes a coherent practice model to assist social workers in their analysis, manageable caseloads, frequent supervision, reflective auditing and mature partnerships. This results in an environment in which social work practice continues to develop and flourish despite a turnover of staff.

A strong and embedded culture of review and learning enables robust analytical understanding of all aspects of services in Merton. Regular wholesale reviews of services or local case and threshold reviews result in a local authority that knows itself well. This was described by one manager as, 'If we spot a problem, we dig,' and this professional curiosity was strongly evident during the inspection. The small areas of practice requiring additional work that were seen by inspectors were already known and were being actively addressed by senior managers.

Children are protected through an outstanding early help offer and a robust 'front door', to consider which intervention would help them best. A review in 2016 of the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and regular threshold testing audits ensure a rounded multi-agency response to protect children when their needs first become known. Responses are timely and proportionate to risk. Thresholds are clearly and consistently applied for children, including when their circumstances and needs change. Child protection plans and child in need plans help to protect and support children and their families well and are based on thorough assessments. Some plans are not sufficiently clear, and so families may not fully understand what is required of them.

Children who are looked after by Merton benefit from good-quality placements, social workers who visit them often and strong support from the virtual school. Comprehensive assessments and support enable children to return home safely

when this is their plan. Applications to court reflect timely planning and strong social work practice, as reflected in very positive feedback from the judiciary and court partners. The role of the corporate parent is well embedded and is taken very seriously. The lead member for children, the chief executive and senior managers consider all children to be 'their' children and they are determined to do their best for them. Parents and carers feel included, leading to positive partnership working. Letters to parents and children, including pre-proceedings letters or complaints, are carefully personalised.

Permanence is secured quickly for children and progress is closely tracked. Children placed in permanent foster care receive a certificate from the assistant director, affirming their sense of belonging. Adoption performance is outstanding, with all children requiring adoption currently placed and no children waiting. Creative use of the adoption support fund ensures that adoption is well supported. Merton has not had an adoption placement breakdown for over five years.

Care leavers do well in Merton. The vast majority are in touch with staff, and determined efforts are made to re-engage with those who are not. Care leavers feel safe where they live and they achieve well. Young people who have left care recently have benefited from receiving their health histories although not all care leavers have received their health histories yet, despite this being a longstanding issue. Only a few care leavers continue to live with their foster carers beyond their 18th birthday; the local authority is actively trying to increase numbers.

Risks associated with child sexual exploitation, missing children, gang involvement or radicalisation are understood exceptionally well and overseen appropriately from a senior multi-agency perspective. Regular scrutiny is provided through a range of methods, including a weekly 'missing' meeting. However, the response to each child for each episode of missing from home or care is not sufficiently robust.

Accurate data and helpful performance information provide insight and ensure that strategic changes to demand and need are anticipated and met. Service redesign, including a flatter management structure, has enabled a 33% increase in frontline social workers. The redesign has resulted in manageable caseloads and effective spans of control, and has enabled changes to the workload of the MASH and the safeguarding teams, as well as the creation of a dedicated permanence service. The very recent implementation of a replacement information technology and case recording system, just prior to the inspection, is being managed efficiently, and staff are being well supported.

Detailed strategic plans and localised improvement plans are aligned with each other and are overseen by mature and exceptionally strong partnerships. The strong professional partnerships in Merton demonstrate that children and their families are highly valued and that they deserve high-quality services.

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The local authority

Information about this local authority area²

Previous Ofsted inspections

- The local authority does not operate any children's homes.
- The previous inspection of the local authority's safeguarding arrangements was in January 2012. The local authority was judged to be good.
- The previous inspection of the local authority's services for children looked after was in January 2012. The local authority was judged to be good.

Local leadership

- The DCS has been in post since January 2009.
- The chief executive has been in post since March 2004.
- The chair of the LSCB has been in post since March 2014.

Children living in this area

- Approximately 46,697 children and young people under the age of 18 years live in Merton. This is 23% of the total population in the area.
- Approximately 15% of the local authority's children aged under 16 years old are living in low-income families.
- The proportion of children entitled to free school meals:
 - in primary schools is 14% (the national average is 15%)
 - in secondary schools is 16% (the national average is 13%).
- Children and young people from minority ethnic groups account for 45% of all children living in the area, compared with 21% in the country as a whole.
- The largest minority ethnic groups of children and young people in the area are Asian or Asian British and Black and Black British.
- The proportion of children and young people who speak English as an additional language:
 - in primary schools is 47% (the national average is 20%)
 - in secondary schools is 36% (the national average is 16%).

² The local authority was given the opportunity to review this section of the report and has updated it with local unvalidated data where this was available.

Child protection in this area

- At 31 March 2017, 1,356 children had been identified through assessment as being formally in need of a specialist children's service. This is a reduction from 1,901 at 31 March 2016.
- At 31 March 2017, 127 children were the subject of a child protection plan (a rate of 27 per 10,000). This is a reduction from 138 children (30 per 10,000) at 31 March 2016.
- At 31 March 2017, four children lived in a privately arranged fostering placement. This is a decrease from nine at the time of the last published data in 2015.
- In the two years prior to inspection, two serious incident notifications have been submitted to Ofsted and one serious case review (SCR) has been completed.
- There were no SCRs ongoing at the time of the inspection.

Children looked after in this area

- At 31 March 2017, 152 children were being looked after by the local authority (a rate of 33 per 10,000 children). This is a reduction from 165 (35 per 10,000 children) at 31 March 2016. Of this number:
 - 102 (or 67%) live outside the local authority area
 - 18 live in residential children's homes, of whom 94% live out of the authority area
 - two live in residential special schools³, both of whom live out of the authority area
 - 108 live with foster families, of whom 58% live out of the authority area
 - three live with their parents, none of whom live out of the authority area
 - 16 are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- In the last 12 months:
 - there have been 11 adoptions
 - six children became the subject of special guardianship orders
 - 113 children ceased to be looked after, of whom 10% subsequently returned to be looked after
 - 25 young people ceased to be looked after and moved on to independent living
 - two young people ceased to be looked after and are now living in houses in multiple occupation.

³ These are residential special schools that look after children for 295 days or less per year.

Social work model

- The local authority uses a systemic practice model that includes 'Signs of Safety'.

Recommendations

1. Ensure that all plans, including child in need, child protection, care plans for children looked after and pathway plans, consistently contain specific actions, achievable timescales and clear, measurable outcomes.
2. Improve the use of return home interviews for each episode of missing for children missing from home or care and ensure that risks are understood and reduced for individual children.
3. Ensure that 'staying put' is made available to all care leavers who would benefit from this.
4. Ensure that all former relevant care leavers receive information on their health histories.

Summary for children and young people

- All staff, including senior managers, know children well and work well together to consider how to help each child and their family.
- Although services for children and young people are already good, staff continue to question how they do things and are keen to do even better. They regularly look carefully at what they have done to see what they can learn.
- Planning for children is mostly done well, but in a few cases the plans are not clear enough about what needs to change for children and what families need to do to make children safer.
- Staff work hard to keep children safe in Merton. Any risks or concerns are taken very seriously and acted on quickly. They do this by working closely with other people, such as the police.
- Some children have had a number of different social workers, but managers keep a close eye on what is happening for children, to minimise the impact of changes.
- Children who are looked after by Merton are involved in the planning for their care. They are listened to and they influence planning for the future.
- Children and families who arrive from different countries receive an exceptional service and are supported sensitively to ensure that they feel secure. This includes meeting with other children in similar circumstances so that they do not feel alone.
- Children who are not able to live with their families live in safe and secure homes. Social workers ensure that children who are placed at some distance from Merton do not miss out on things that will be of interest or help to them.
- Care leavers are supported to do well and they feel safe where they live. Only a small number of young people continue to live with their foster carers after their 18th birthday. The local authority is taking action to ensure that more young people can stay with their foster carers if they wish to.

<p>The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection</p>	<p>Good</p>
<p>Consistently good services support children in need of help and protection in Merton, improving their circumstances and keeping them safe. High-quality early help assessments help to identify needs, leading to children and families benefiting from a range of integrated early help support services.</p> <p>Staff within the MASH effectively assess and prioritise contacts and referrals, ensuring prompt and proportionate responses so that children most at risk receive appropriate and timely services. Strong management oversight and decision-making are evident on all case recording.</p> <p>Effective multi-agency responses to children at risk of sexual exploitation and children who are missing from home or school help to ensure that they are kept safe. Good outcomes are supported by strong attendance at the multi-agency sexual exploitation panel, weekly multi-agency missing meetings and timely strategy discussions with a range of appropriate services. However, the response to individual children who go missing from home, including the timeliness of return home interviews, is not consistent, so the factors that influence the behaviour are not clear.</p> <p>Staff have a good understanding of risk. Effective early identification of risks in relation to female genital mutilation, forced marriage, gang affiliation and radicalisation leads to proactive and immediate safeguarding of young people. If necessary, this includes legal orders, accompanied by comprehensive multi-agency support. Strong multi-agency partnership working, including information sharing and attendance at child protection meetings, is protecting children from risk of further significant harm. However, child in need and child protection plans are not clear enough to ensure that parents understand what needs to change, and in what timescales, and to help monitor the progression of each plan.</p> <p>Timely and effective arrangements are in place to respond to 16- and 17-year-olds at risk of homelessness. The local authority does not use bed and breakfast accommodation for any 16- or 17-year-olds.</p> <p>Comprehensive awareness raising in relation to private fostering has led to appropriate referrals. Children currently known to be living in private fostering arrangements are appropriately safeguarded and supported well.</p> <p>There is good use of advocacy, including appropriate advocacy for disabled children and children and young people subject to child protection procedures, enabling careful consideration of their voices within planning.</p>	

Inspection findings

5. Children and young people in need of help and protection in Merton receive a good service. Managers and staff know their children well. Manageable caseloads and skilled staff mean that they are able to visit children and their families regularly, build meaningful relationships and undertake purposeful direct work. Effective direct work is widespread, including with children at risk of sexual exploitation, and individualised direct work with disabled children meets the communication needs of each child.
6. The Merton Child and Young Person Well-Being Model guides threshold decisions and is supported by a well-embedded wide range of integrated early help services, commissioned and brokered by the Children's Trust partnership. Thresholds are understood well by partner agencies and applied appropriately, resulting in effective and timely interventions for children.
7. The training and engagement with early help partners contribute to very strong early help assessments, which are undertaken by a wide range of partners. This ensures timely identification of need, with decision-making and work overseen by a social work qualified team manager. Effective intervention at an early stage is having a positive impact on reducing the number of children who require a more specialist service. Families benefit from prompt support from a range of innovative, high-quality early help services, such as a dedicated victim support service for children, and mental health practitioners in schools. Parents spoke very highly of the early help services available and the positive difference that they are making for children.
8. If risks to children change, they experience a relatively seamless transition between early help and statutory services. Step-up and step-down processes are well considered and purposeful, with the vast majority evidencing a clear rationale and decision-making. This ensures that children and their families are receiving the right service at the right level of intervention to meet their needs.
9. Multi-agency information sharing has improved significantly, with increased access to a wide range of multi-agency data. Consent is understood well and is clearly recorded. Children's social care services, the police, health, early help and education are co-located in the MASH, ensuring timely risk analysis of information to inform decision-making to safeguard children. However, consistency is still required in ensuring that information from schools is obtained in a timely manner. The 'vulnerable children's team' is working closely with schools to improve timescales.
10. Additional staffing resources for the MASH and first response teams, as from 2016, are further improving timely responses. The majority of cases are handled within the agreed timescales and are monitored closely via the recently implemented MASH live dashboard. This is enabling timely and

carefully considered responses so that children most at risk quickly receive appropriate services. There is good liaison and handover with the emergency duty team, which is staffed by suitably experienced children's social workers, who provide an effective service to children and families out of normal office hours.

11. The social work model used by children's services is helpfully also applied by partner agencies, and this is leading to improvements in the quality of work to assess risks to children. The vast majority of case recording identifies appropriate safeguarding concerns and safety goals, which are developed in regular child in need meetings, child protection conferences and conference reviews. However, plans are not consistently clear in all cases. This means that a small number of parents are not fully aware of what needs to change and in what timescales, and this makes it more difficult to monitor whether plans are progressing in a timely way. (Recommendation)
12. In the vast majority of cases, escalation of concerns or non-engagement by families leads to appropriate, timely and proportionate responses to risks to children, in line with contingency plans overseen by managers.
13. Child protection enquiries to protect children at risk of abuse, through strategy discussions and section 47 child protection enquiries, are timely. In the majority of cases, a multi-agency response informs the decision-making to protect children. However, there is some variability for a small minority of children, with some agencies not participating consistently. As a result of efforts made by senior managers and the Merton Safeguarding Children Board (MSCB), multi-agency attendance and input to child in need meetings and child protection conferences have significantly improved and continue to be closely monitored.
14. Children's wishes and feelings are strongly heard and clearly reflected in practice. Their views and voices are carefully considered in assessments, strategy meetings and social work records to inform planning. Case records are clear, timely and up to date, including assessments and chronologies. In a very small minority of cases, case recording does not fully reflect the lived experiences of very young children or does not consistently highlight the separate needs of individual children in large family groups. Recording evidences management oversight and decision-making. There is a small amount of inconsistent recording of timescales for actions within assessments and supervisions, which senior managers are aware of.
15. The local authority has undertaken a comprehensive needs analysis to understand the prevalence of domestic abuse, mental ill health and substance misuse within the borough. Recent developments include the appointment of a specialist adult mental health liaison worker to enhance partnership working, to provide training across adults' and children's services and to update the joint protocol for safeguarding children and families who have mental health

needs. The multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPAs) and multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARACs) are consistently well attended and effective in supporting timely information sharing, effective risk management and decision-making.

16. There are clear and effective multi-agency responses to identify and respond to children at risk of going missing or missing education. Most cases of children missing education close within three months, as the vast majority of children are effectively supported back into school. Education welfare staff are persistent in their tracking of children missing education, an example being undertaking unannounced visits at known addresses. They liaise and share information effectively with other local authorities and within the council, and escalate cases to social care when necessary, overseen by the multi-agency children missing education panel.
17. Risks associated with child sexual exploitation or missing from home are given a high priority and are understood well. Weekly 'missing' meetings are held in the MASH. The meetings are regularly attended by social workers, the police, a gangs worker, the children looked after nurse, the youth offending service, the child sexual exploitation lead and a representative from the commissioned service that provides return home interviews. Through the combination of the multi-agency sexual exploitation panel, weekly multi-agency 'missing' meetings and timely strategy discussions, children missing from care or home and children at risk of sexual exploitation are effectively identified and responded to. A wide range of appropriate services, including commissioned services, are in place to support and protect children. However, the processes for offering children return home interviews following every episode of going missing, or completing those interviews in a timely manner to fully understand the push and pull factors, are not robust. (Recommendation)
18. Disabled children receive support and services that ensure that they are protected and achieve. There is strong early identification of risks in relation to female genital mutilation, forced marriage, gang affiliation and radicalisation, overseen by the MSCB promote and protect young people (PPYP) steering group. This is leading to proactive and immediate safeguarding of young people, including legal orders, supported by comprehensive multi-agency support.
19. Children living in private fostering arrangements receive a good service. Comprehensive awareness raising has led to appropriate referrals and timely assessments. In cases seen by inspectors, children were seen alone within statutory timescales and they were appropriately safeguarded and supported well.
20. Young people aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless receive timely and thorough joint assessments with housing services. Assessments show that social workers consider their views and those of their family. However,

recording does not consistently reflect social workers' explanations to young people about their legal entitlements in order to demonstrate that young people have made informed choices about their futures. When young people choose not to be looked after, suitable accommodation and support are provided.

21. Arrangements for managing allegations against staff, carers and volunteers who work with children in Merton are timely and appropriate, and thresholds and intervention are applied appropriately. However, inspectors found that a turnover of four different designated officers since April 2016, a change of line management and the implementation of a new recording system had resulted in inconsistent and unclear case recording. The local authority responded promptly and appropriately and was able to evidence the work that had been done, accompanied by a clear management overview of each case.
22. Inspectors saw very effective use of advocacy, including appropriate advocacy for disabled children, when there have been issues of deprivation of liberty. Increasing numbers of advocates are working with children subject to child protection procedures, to ensure consideration of their views in conferences.
23. Social workers carefully consider the diverse needs of the families that they work with. However, case recording is not fully reflective of the range of ways in which this takes place and the thoughtful work undertaken.

<p>The experiences and progress of children looked after and achieving permanence</p>	<p>Good</p>
<p>Children looked after in Merton receive a consistently good service. The needs of each individual child are known well. Children become looked after at the right time and without unnecessary delay. Appropriate support and edge-of-care services are used effectively as an alternative to care. Effective management oversight of pre-proceedings and assessment work adds rigour to decision-making and ensures safe oversight of the experiences for children on the threshold of being looked after. Assessments for children returning home are robust, and ongoing support is provided to the families.</p> <p>The majority of children looked after enjoy a stable relationship with their social workers. A small number of children have experienced changes of social worker early in their care journey, which has made it more difficult to form trusting relationships. Caseloads are maintained at a manageable level to enable social workers to have time to develop relationships with the children. The service to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is impressive. It is sensitive and swift and enables the children to settle quickly and to form friendships.</p> <p>Children’s participation is encouraged, their individual needs are known and their voice is evident. Children have access to advocates wherever they are placed, and participation in reviews continues to strengthen. A committed and active Children in Care Council (CiCC) influences service developments and provides consultation and feedback on issues relating to their experiences.</p> <p>The local authority is aware of the priorities within the children looked after population and continues to work to meet the challenges of placement stability and sufficiency for the significant proportion of older adolescents. Diversity is given careful consideration. Risks associated with going missing and sexual exploitation are known and effectively tracked on a multi-agency basis, and effective work is undertaken to ensure that children are kept safe. However, information gained through individual return home interviews is not always used effectively to inform future planning.</p> <p>Permanence options are considered early, ensuring that there is no delay in the formulation of long-term plans. The work in the adoption service is outstanding. Skilled and tenacious social work practice ensures good outcomes for children, and prospective adopters receive excellent preparation and training. No children are currently awaiting an adoptive placement.</p> <p>The vast majority of care leavers are supported well. They develop the skills that they need to live independently and to achieve their career and education goals. Not all care leavers have received a copy of their health history and only a very small number currently remain with their foster carers under a ‘staying put’ arrangement.</p>	

Inspection findings

24. The needs of children looked after are understood well by managers and staff. The local authority has been proactive and rigorous in identifying and understanding the needs of the looked after population, including the large group of children aged over 16. Thresholds to care have been tested through a time-limited edge of care panel and a comprehensive adolescent needs analysis. Thresholds are applied appropriately and children receive the service that they need to ensure that they are kept safe in a timely way. Clear management oversight and accountability ensure that thresholds are consistently applied. The head of service for children looked after agrees all new admissions, adding further rigour to the decision-making.
25. Children are protected well through appropriate use of the court process when necessary. Use of the Public Law Outline is effectively monitored and supported by a court progression officer, who offers guidance and advice to social workers. Progress is monitored well via case progression meetings and a tracker system to ensure a timely response for children.
26. Permanence in all forms has a high priority and is considered early for children. Regular permanency tracking meetings are chaired by the head of service for children looked after and attended by heads of service for safeguarding and resources, the court progression officer and the adoption team manager. This ensures that plans progress in a timely and considered manner. Separate consideration for children under five and over five provides further rigour to permanence planning.
27. All types of placements, including with friends and relatives, are well supported. Assessments of connected persons are completed in a timely way. The number of children in special guardianship placements has increased in the last year, and there have been no breakdowns of extended family placements during this time.
28. The judiciary and the Child and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) are extremely complimentary about the work of the local authority, considering it robust and timely. With proceedings completed within an average of 24 weeks, Merton is exceeding national guidelines and has improved in this area of practice considerably.
29. When children return home to live with their families, a robust assessment and comprehensive support ensure a successful and enduring rehabilitation. Social workers remain involved and plans continue to be monitored.
30. Children experience good and stable relationships with social workers, who are part of a dedicated looked after and permanence service. Greater stability of social workers and manageable caseloads provide stronger social work

relationships to children and a deeper understanding of their needs. For a small number of children, changes of social worker in the early part of their care journey affected the quality of relationships and the formulation of their plan.

31. Care planning is effective for the vast majority of children, and the needs of each child are understood well. For a small minority of children, forward planning is not sufficiently clear and does not include measurable timescales. For a few children, the care plan does not reflect changes in the child's circumstances. (Recommendation)
32. An effective and well-used advocacy service assists children to participate in their reviews and provides support when they are making complaints. This service is also available to children who are placed out of borough, ensuring that no one is excluded. A successful independent visiting service supports children, and more volunteers are currently being trained and already matched to children. Due to the success of this service, in both numbers and the relationship offered, there are still children waiting to be matched with an independent visitor. Senior managers are aware of this and are considering how to ensure that children do not miss out on this valued support.
33. An active CiCC influences and guides services for children looked after. The CiCC has been involved in the development of 'The Pledge' and invites other services and professionals to attend, including the lead member for children's services and a representative from the housing department. The permanence team for children looked after is seeking ways to engage younger children in the CiCC, to ensure that the views of a wider age range are considered.
34. Children benefit from regular review meetings that are well attended and inclusive. The local authority has piloted a new model of looked after reviews, aimed at facilitating greater involvement by the child in the review meetings. This is having a positive effect, with the most recent local authority data showing 99.5% of children participating in their reviews. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) report having access to court bundles and being included more in the planning process. IROs challenge practice when necessary, and disputes are resolved informally when possible. However, the recording of this is inconsistent and, as a consequence, the footprint and influence of the IROs are not evident on children's files.
35. Children's views are taken into account when forward planning, and case records illustrate the work that is being completed with children and discussions regarding their future. Appropriate contact with birth families is supported, and children are assisted to understand their life histories at a time and pace that is suitable for them. Life story work is of a consistently high quality. A skilled and flexible in-house child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) team offers consultation and guidance to social workers and foster carers and direct work to children. The quality of this input is high, and

there are clear, improved outcomes for children. This systemic service reflects the wider model of practice used in Merton and workers remain involved for as long as the need remains.

36. The health of children looked after is effectively monitored and overseen. A dedicated health nurse for children looked after has been in post since November 2016 and ensures that the health needs of children looked after are recognised and met. This includes proactive follow up of documents to ensure that an initial health assessment can take place, and travelling to see children out of authority if necessary. Regular reporting to the corporate parenting board and the health strategy board, as well as providing a health presence in child sexual exploitation meetings and 'missing' meetings, results in a widespread awareness of the health needs of children looked after.
37. Children and young people receive good support from the virtual school wherever they live. Staff maintain good oversight of the progress of children looked after. They know the circumstances of individual children and use this information very effectively to work with others, such as social workers, carers and schools, to plan the support that children need to make progress in their learning. The large majority of children looked after (96%) go to a school judged good or better by Ofsted. When they do not, staff carefully consider whether the setting is meeting the individual needs of children.
38. A high proportion (74%) of children looked after have special educational and/or complex needs. Their attainment is often below age-related expectation. However, with the support of the virtual school and partners, the majority of children looked after make good progress in their education. After children leave school, nearly all successfully engage in further education, training or employment.
39. Advisory teachers and the virtual school headteacher take the lead on the planning of the education of children looked after. As a result, children have good-quality, up-to-date and timely personal education plans that reflect their needs well. Their education targets are clear and they help carers and professionals to maintain good oversight of children's progress. The pupil premium grant and additional funding from the virtual school are used well to support children's academic progress and their personal development.
40. The virtual school team closely monitors children looked after who are missing education and is an active partner in supporting their return to education. The team makes strenuous efforts to ensure that children and young people engage in learning. As a result, most children looked after attend school regularly and few experience exclusion from school. There have not been any permanent exclusions from school for the last seven years, and fixed-term exclusions are reducing, both in terms of the number of episodes and the number of children.

41. The majority of children in Merton benefit from secure and stable placements. Sufficient in-house fostering households, with appropriate commissioning arrangements, result in children living in well-matched placements. The number of 16- and 17-year-olds who enter local authority care is increasing and they now constitute 44% of the overall cohort. The local authority has responded to this challenge in proactively analysing the need and tailoring services as required. Despite the considerable effort and planning invested, it remains a challenge to locate placements for teenagers who have complex needs or who are at risk of sexual exploitation or exploitation by gangs. The local authority continues to actively plan and respond. The learning and development strategy is focusing on the skills needed to manage teenagers, to encourage current carers to consider extending their offer.
42. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive an impressive service. The local authority ensures that it exercises its responsibilities without delay and with considerable sensitivity. Regular, informal coffee shop group meetings offer friendship and help to develop confidence and to reduce isolation. Whenever possible, the children are placed in family placements. Good connections with a local college enable the children to access courses to develop their English language skills, and links with solicitors reduce the stress of legal uncertainty.
43. Risks generally are understood, and social workers act quickly to protect children in their care. Children at risk of sexual exploitation are effectively monitored by the child sexual exploitation coordinator. In addition, there has been some good joint work between children's social care and youth offending services, to address the risks associated with involvement with gangs. Children who are missing from care are known, and risks are actively monitored at weekly 'missing' meetings. The recording of return home interviews is not consistently good and, in a small number of cases, it could not be determined what information had been gathered to inform risk management and safety plans. (Recommendation)
44. Family finding for permanent foster placements is tenacious, and children who are waiting for families benefit from the same determined approach as those seeking adoptive families. Approved foster carers safely meet the needs of a range of children, including those who have complex needs or disabilities and groups of brothers and sisters. Within a well-run fostering service, foster carers receive consistent support and regular announced and unannounced visits from supervising social workers, and they are able to access a range of appropriate and regularly available training. Allegations against foster carers are carefully and robustly investigated and result in de-registration if appropriate.
45. Foster carers understand delegated authority, and children are encouraged to access activities that promote their social, educational and recreational needs. Annual reviews are comprehensive and up to date.

The graded judgement for adoption performance is that it is outstanding

46. The local authority gives high priority to identifying and quickly securing adoption for children when adoption is in their best interests. Strategic leaders, managers and social workers have an excellent knowledge about the children in their care, and they are passionate about achieving the very best outcomes.
47. Timely and accurate early identification of children, when adoption is in their best interests, leads to appropriate and prompt family finding. Successful outcomes are driven through case progression, monthly tracking and permanence and care planning meetings. Managers maintain a stringent overview for each child and provide an early alert to the adoption social workers and wider consortium about the children's profiles. Consortium meetings facilitate further exchange and discussion about prospective matches. Children benefit from early identification of potential matches with approved adopters, including before the granting of the placement order, and move swiftly to live with their new families following the court decision.
48. The experienced senior practitioners in the adoption team are highly skilled and know their children and adopters well. Family finding is creative and tenacious and is supported effectively by a skilled publicity officer who provides professional profiling and marketing. Children's drawings form the backdrop to their profiles, which are highly personal and regularly refreshed and updated. An extensive range of local and national family finding methods are used and this results in an equally positive outcome for very young babies through to older children who have complex needs. The success of the service has resulted in there being no children currently awaiting an adoptive match, and all children who require adoption are placed.
49. The assessment, preparation, training and support of adopters are exceptional and are consistently of the highest standard, being insightful, highly effective and responsive. Prospective adopters benefit from hearing powerful histories from birth parents, adopters and adopted adults at introduction and preparation sessions. Feedback from adopters to inspectors reflected the impact of the high-quality preparation, including the increased empathy for birth parents and a balanced expectation of parenting as adopters.
50. The quality of prospective adopter reports is impressive. Child permanence reports are comprehensive and analytical and lead to a logical recommendation for adoption. Social workers comprehensively explore a wide range of potential issues with sensitivity and insight. All assessments seen by inspectors bring out the unique needs of children and the individual skill of adoptive parents, and some are of an outstanding quality. Recruitment is effective and has led to a significant increase in the number of approved

adopters in the last year (from three to 12), which means that there is an increased pool of suitable families waiting to provide children with a permanent home. A well-embedded foster for adoption scheme ensures that social workers discuss this option with all prospective adopters. A specially tailored workshop is then offered to interested adopters to help to prepare them further.

51. Social workers are determined in their efforts to find families for brothers and sisters, children from a range of cultural and religious backgrounds and children who have complex needs. This persistence has achieved successful adoptions for brother and sister groups, for children who have special needs and for older children. All of the 11 children adopted last year moved into their adoptive families in 10 months or under. This is a significant improvement on the previous year. For a very small number of children who have had a change of plan away from adoption, this is well informed and the alternative permanent placement has been secured. Inspectors have seen positive progress for all children, and there are no children currently waiting for a family.
52. Performance against the adoption scorecard demonstrates that the local authority is performing well and has made further significant progress in the past year. The consistently improving trajectory of Merton's performance is evidence of the effectiveness of the authority's sharp focus on timeliness. This is strong practice, confirmed by feedback from the judiciary and Cafcass.
53. Adopters spoke consistently of the excellent quality and timeliness of matching and placement. Success with foster for adoption placements and the fast-track process for second-time adopters contribute to this achievement. Excellent foster for adoption arrangements have resulted in the successful early placement of three babies in foster for adoption families, directly from hospital. Children benefit from particularly resourceful and, where appropriate, culturally sensitive pre- and post-birth work to safeguard mothers and their unborn babies and to ensure a nurturing environment after they are born. Support for birth parents is outstanding in helping them to make difficult decisions and to remain involved through indirect contact and by providing a wealth of information for life story work.
54. A gradual phased introduction to their new family prepares children well for adoption and proceeds at the child's pace. Social workers are creative in supporting and directing the process, using photographs and other resources to help children to make the transition calmly and positively. The timeframe for the transition is led by the child. Foster for adoption introductions are supported sensitively to take place between birth parents and adopters.
55. The independent panel chair and the agency decision maker (ADM) regularly discuss children's plans, and inspectors saw evidence of appropriate strong challenge. Together, they achieve the highest standards in the planning for

children. The highly effective cycle of quality assurance is having a noticeable impact, and panel and ADM decisions are very well considered and thorough. Adoptive parents benefit from meeting with the medical adviser at panel, which gives them the opportunity to discuss the potential health needs of children so that they are well informed.

56. Adoption support is excellent and highly creative. It ensures that adopted children form strong attachments to their families, and potential issues are identified and addressed at the earliest stage. There is a range of provision coordinated by a dedicated social worker post. Annual fun days for adopted children, theraplay and individual parenting sessions are available. The consortium provides a range of established post-adoption support groups for birth parents and adopted adults. There is effective and creative use of adoption support funding (ASF) and this is having a positive impact for children and families. Families are aware of how to access the provision, and all families who have requested support are receiving it. ASF is helping children and families to access therapeutic work and dyadic developmental psychotherapy. Adoption support is extended to all children in the household when required.
57. Later life letters are sensitive, non-judgemental and written so that children can understand how and why they were adopted. Letters are child-focused, compassionate and insightful, with a respectful understanding of the experience of the birth parents. Letterbox arrangements are robust. Compelling life story work helps children to understand and make sense of their past and the reasons that they are unable to live with their birth families. Excellent work is undertaken to enable children to understand identity, including cultural identity. The virtual school recognises the unique education needs of adopted children and provides additional support for children placed for adoption.

The graded judgement about the experience and progress of care leavers is that it is good

58. The majority of young people who leave care receive good support that builds their skills and confidence well as they move towards independence. Social workers and personal advisers in the dedicated 14-plus team are in touch with 96% of their care leavers and form trusting and productive relationships with them through regular face-to-face contact. Young people described their workers as approachable and supportive.
59. If young people disengage, staff make concerted efforts to establish contact through unannounced visits to their homes, via letter, text and email, through known family and friends and through the job centre, if appropriate. In the best instances, this results in young people re-engaging with the support services on offer.

60. Social workers and personal advisers know and understand young people's individual circumstances and needs well. They manage known risks to young people, including sexual exploitation, well. They develop effective plans with partners, such as the police, which are responsive to young people's changing needs, and over time young people stabilise their lives and make good progress. In a small minority of cases, managers do not intervene quickly enough to help staff to consider alternative plans, when young people are not moving forward with their lives.
61. Planning is effective for the large majority of young people who have an up-to-date pathway plan that covers well all aspects of their lives. Plans are detailed, and young people are effectively involved in developing their own plans. A minority of pathway plans are insufficiently detailed, and there is not enough emphasis on the support that the young person will receive to achieve their goals. The pathway plans of a small minority of young people are out of date, and planning to meet the young people's current needs is insufficient, although inspectors did not see any detriment to young people as a result of this. (Recommendation)
62. The virtual school, social workers and personal advisers effectively support young people to navigate the education, employment and training (EET) options available to them. As a result, a good proportion of care leavers are in EET. Within this overall positive picture, senior managers and staff recognise that staff do not sufficiently promote apprenticeships to young people. Managers are developing strategies to ensure that apprenticeships are more widely available to vulnerable young people.
63. Young people seeking to study at university receive particularly good assistance prior to applying for a university place, and they receive practical help with their applications and personal statements. This results in a high number of young people studying at university. The local authority is flexible and creative in extending support. While studying, young people receive good financial support and additional funding, for example, to purchase essential books and for travel to see relatives.
64. The large majority of care leavers live in suitable accommodation. All young people who spoke to inspectors feel that they are safe where they live. With good support from carers, the 14-plus team and housing providers, many young people make a successful transition from care to living independently.
65. There is a good range of accommodation options for young people. Most care leavers live in semi-independent accommodation with support available that is appropriate for their particular needs. Bed and breakfast accommodation is never used; young people who need emergency accommodation are usually housed within the existing housing provider network. However, the use of 'staying put' arrangements is underdeveloped. Managers are aware of this and

are developing plans to improve the opportunities for young people to remain with their foster carers beyond the age of 18. (Recommendation)

66. Young people receive good support in developing the skills and knowledge that they need to live independently and to manage their own affairs. Prior to securing their own tenancies, they attend useful workshops on managing their money, budgeting to run a household and home maintenance. With ongoing help from social workers and personal advisers, young people manage their tenancies successfully. There have been no tenancy breakdowns in the last two years for young people moving into their first homes.
67. Care leavers who arrive as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive very good support from the 14-plus team. Young people value highly the support and help that they receive from their foster carers and social workers. Young people settle quickly in foster care, attend school or college and develop well in their spoken English. Their health needs are assessed and met promptly. A monthly drop-in provides excellent opportunities for these young people to develop friendships with their peers, receive informal support and gain new experiences, such as taking part in outdoor activities and restaurant visits. Many make excellent progress in their studies and are highly ambitious for their future.
68. Most young people are aware of their rights and entitlements, such as the support that they will receive while at college or university and the financial help that they are entitled to when they set up their first homes. The advocacy service has recently been extended to include care leavers to support this further.
69. Staff effectively help young people to manage their own health needs independently. On turning 18 years old, young people receive a useful leaflet on important health services and contacts. Most young people register with their local doctors and dentists. Although this year all young people who have turned 18 years old have received a copy of their health history, this is not the case for all those young people currently open to the leaving care team. (Recommendation)
70. Care leavers who are more vulnerable, such as those in custody, are equally well supported by staff, who are sometimes the only regular visitors while they serve their sentences. Most young people have appropriate accommodation available to them on their release from custody. Staff are proactive in trying to secure EET options for young people at the time that they leave custody and, in most cases, work well with other partners, such as the virtual school, to ensure that young people have every opportunity to succeed.

Leadership, management and governance	Outstanding
<p>Senior managers and politicians model a constructive, enquiring and engaging style of leadership and management. It comprises a blend of compassion and concern for the most vulnerable children and families, and conspicuous care and support for frontline workers. A highly visible thread of meaningful children’s participation and influence is apparent. These elements are balanced with high expectations for skilled, evidence-based social work that improves the circumstances for children.</p> <p>This leadership and management landscape creates a lively, challenging and rewarding environment for social workers. Strong frontline managers, carefully managed workloads and an evidence-informed approach create time for social workers to practise creative and effective direct work with children. This leads to well-crafted assessments and interventions, which are concentrated on understanding and improving the experiences of children.</p> <p>High-quality data and performance information are used well at all strategic and operational groups and across all management layers. The performance and quality assurance frameworks are closely interwoven and provide a wide range of useful information. This leads to services, teams or individual workers that require attention being quickly identified. Equally, senior managers identify and celebrate many examples of good social work, offering practitioners ample exposure to effective social work practice. Leaders and managers are ambitious and driven to continually develop the services that vulnerable children receive. They strive to improve even when evidence indicates that they are already performing well.</p> <p>Departmental and inter-agency senior management communication is regular and purposeful, ensuring that children’s issues are prominent in the Health and Well-being Board and the Safer and Stronger Partnership Board. Relationships and lines of accountability between the Children’s Trust Board and MSCB are strong and clear. Strategic partnership and governance arrangements across the spectrum of boards provide a cooperative climate for high-level conversations. This is subsequently reflected in improved or new approaches to operational arrangements, including, for example, young people exposed to extremist influences, gangs and sexual exploitation.</p> <p>Creative recruitment and detailed and continuous promotion of social workers’ professional development at all levels of experience ensure a skilled workforce. The impact of staff turnover is mitigated appropriately by strong operational management oversight.</p>	

71. The DCS is highly skilled, dedicated and experienced. As the longest serving DCS in London, she provides a sustained and energetic commitment to continually improving outcomes for the most vulnerable children. The quality of all services is good or better, building further on the 'good' judgements at the last Ofsted inspection in 2012. The leadership style emphasises the core values of compassion, humility, social justice and inclusion. These sit alongside a requirement for the highest standards of frontline practice with children and families, and poor practice is actively addressed. This approach is apparent in the DCS's leadership of the Children's Trust, which maintains an authoritative and informed overview of performance.
72. Strong and impressive early help services, improved educational attainment and high-quality targeted and specialist services are prioritised in equal measure by leaders and senior managers. These include a prominent focus on disabled children and children who have special educational needs. The DCS maintains a variety of formal and informal routes for regularly meeting frontline staff, foster parents and children, including those who are looked after and unaccompanied asylum seekers. This provides the DCS with a comprehensive and well-informed range of insights into the effectiveness of frontline practice.
73. An influential corporate parenting board, chaired by the longstanding and experienced chief executive, illustrates the importance given at the highest level of the local authority to effective cross-council responses to the needs of children looked after. It enables the chief executive to understand directly the performance of frontline services. Successful collaborative working yields results for children. As an example, the formation of an integrated commissioning hub assisted in opening negotiations with local social housing providers. This resulted in the provision of additional priority accommodation for young people leaving care and led to the housing department becoming standing members of the board. The board's priorities are carefully considered and take into account the joint strategic needs assessment (JSNA), performance information and the views of the CiCC.
74. Strong partnership, shared accountability and challenge are clearly evident in Merton. The chief executive, the lead member for children's services and the DCS all have active chair or membership roles in the Safer Merton Partnership Board, the Violence against Women and Girls Group, the Health and Well-being Board and the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Panel. This has resulted, for example, in the chair of the Health and Well-being Board and the lead member meeting before each board to plan the inclusion of children's priorities in the agenda. Any impact on children's health outcomes is considered in all local authority priorities. Additionally, progress has been made in targeted objectives, such as improving the take-up of immunisations and the joint commissioning of community health services for the under-fives, with the clinical commissioning group. The capacity and availability of CAMHS practitioners in social work teams have increased,

including the provision of more direct support and consultation for children looked after.

75. The DCS chairs the Youth Crime Executive Board. This cross-representation means that domestic abuse services for families, including MARACs and the independent domestic violence advisers, are closely aligned with adult services. Well-devised strategic and operational relationships with the police enable rigorous responses to child sexual exploitation, gangs, missing children and other adolescent vulnerabilities. Similarly, frequent meetings with the chair of the MSCB result in well-aligned single- and multi-agency training programmes and auditing schedules. The assistant director social care and youth inclusion chairs the MSCB's quality subgroup, demonstrating an intent to expand relevant parts of the practice model across partner agencies, and to have oversight of the quality of multi-agency practice.
76. Interventions with children and young people vulnerable to extremist influences are well planned and effective. Arrangements for multi-agency governance, awareness raising, operational oversight and partnership work with the local police and counter-terrorist police are all well designed, including regular work with local schools. A partnership board coordinates intelligence carefully and oversees a wide spectrum of community cohesion work, embracing local mosques and churches through a 'safe faith' approach. Local MSCB guidance for partner agencies is clear and helpful. A Channel panel meets monthly to plan and review interventions with a small number of children where concerns are greater.
77. Children exposed to risks of sexual exploitation receive protective and well-developed strategic and multi-agency responses. Multi-agency governance arrangements are tightly coordinated and led by the MSCB. A multi-agency sexual exploitation panel closely tracks the impact of risk reduction work provided by a range of locally commissioned services. Joint work with the police is highly integrated, and targeted strategy meetings are attended by all involved agencies, chaired by an experienced and knowledgeable specialist child sexual abuse coordinator. The coordinator routinely checks the quality of responses to contacts and referrals into the MASH, and is further developing the use of screening and assessment tools through ongoing consultations with social workers. Multiple risks to missing children are also well understood and evaluated through pan-agency weekly meetings. However, the individual response for each child through completion of return home interviews is inconsistent. This is being carefully monitored and addressed by senior managers.
78. High-quality performance information is closely scrutinised at all management levels and at the children's and young people's overview and scrutiny committee, through weekly, monthly, bi-monthly and quarterly datasets. The chief executive and DCS discuss performance information at their regular meetings. Accessible dashboards provide snapshots of all local and national

indicators across the spectrum of services, and useful hyperlinks allow closer examination of particular teams and individual practitioners. This enables early attention to emerging difficulties.

79. Performance management and reporting are firmly established with a stable team manager group. Remedial actions result in notable improvements, including, for example, additional investment to increase social worker capacity in the first response teams. This resulted in an improvement in both the quality and timeliness of assessments. Following manager attention, participation rates in EET for young people leaving care climbed above national levels.
80. Performance and quality assurance frameworks are closely aligned and mutually reinforcing. Auditing is well targeted, based on sound performance intelligence, resulting in practice learning and improvement. When performance trends require greater exploration, periodic deeper dives are undertaken. An adolescent needs analysis is a recent example of a detailed and probing analysis of factors underlying placement instability, triggered by a surge in the numbers of older young people becoming looked after. A care leavers' service improvement board, chaired by an assistant director, has led to important service improvements. The assistant director children's social care meets regularly with the team manager group to discuss and highlight learning points arising from audits and quality assurance activities, further demonstrating a deeply ingrained learning and development culture.
81. New elements of the practice model are being introduced and piloted, including regular practice observations and a live auditing model to promote coaching for social workers facing difficult, complex issues in their casework. The DCS, assistant director social care and youth inclusion and all managers maintain a high level of interest, curiosity and knowledge about children's cases. Social workers highly value these appreciative inquiries and interest in their work. Regular, high-quality supervision and management oversight are evident across all services. They are largely evaluative, analytical and well recorded, providing helpful direction for practitioners.
82. Developments in children's needs are understood by increasingly bespoke JSNA reports that are regularly updated. Incisive analyses have been undertaken, for example, of child sexual exploitation and children living in families exposed to the higher risks associated with the 'trigger trio' of parenting vulnerabilities: domestic abuse, mental ill health and substance misuse. Joint and single commissioning of universal and targeted services is concentrated on the most deprived parts of the borough, where outcomes for many children are known to be poorer. Young people are both involved and highly influential as 'young inspectors' throughout commissioning programmes. Their participation in the design and development of a forthcoming community hub has been extensive. Commissioned services, and

those provided directly by the local authority, such as parenting programmes, are subject to rigorous and regular contract monitoring.

83. Both the judiciary and Cafcass report a consistently high standard of evidence preparation by social workers in care proceedings, which are completed within the required 26-week timescale. Communication with the local authority is positive and constructive, enabling any issues to be quickly addressed.
84. Merton's social work practice model is at the centre of the continuous development of effective and evidence-based social work with children and families. The model is based on systemic theories and appreciative, critical enquiries to assess the strengths, needs and risks in families. It is led by the assistant director for children's social care, who chairs a social work board and a practice development group. The model features a number of evidence-based practice tools and direct work methods, such as motivational interviewing with older children. Social workers and managers are provided with phased and continuous training in the model through a close and well-established partnership with a local university. Social workers' ongoing professional development is promoted at all stages of their experience. Well-defined career progression pathways encourage committed and talented social workers to progress and flourish. The continuing development of the practice model is supported by additional funding and a well-formulated project plan, illustrating a demonstrable corporate and departmental commitment to high-quality social work with children and families.
85. A restless ambition to continuously develop better practice is discernible, led by the assistant director for children's social care who is a committed, motivational and skilled social work leader. The learning and development programme is centred on the model, providing many openings for social workers to learn new approaches, for example in direct work with adolescents. Senior managers are outward facing and regularly invite external peer reviews of their services. They are actively engaged with, or lead, regional groups and initiatives and are eager to learn about social work practice in other local authorities. This is exemplified in the leadership of the introduction of a Family Drug and Alcohol Court, and the active participation in an evolving social impact bond edge-of-care service, which will include multi-systemic and functional family therapies.
86. Annual turnover of social workers is approximately 25%. This turnover occurs despite a supportive and dynamic professional environment for social workers, positively reported on in their annual survey. Recruitment and retention, a constant senior manager preoccupation, are of critical importance, featuring constructive joint work with human resources. Recruitment initiatives are widespread and continuous. Additional annual funding of £1 million each year over the last three years, through corporate growth and contingency use as well as recycling money within the children's services department, has increased frontline social worker posts by 33% and enabled manageable

caseloads and smaller teams with tighter management oversight. Students and newly qualified social workers are provided with high-quality support and training. The 'Frontline' programme is well established and 'Step Up to Social Work' is being developed. Market supplements and retention incentives are used to attract experienced social workers and to retain them in service areas where turnover is typically greater. Senior managers resist recruiting too many newly qualified social workers, as they are aware that this will add to the responsibilities and pressures on their existing experienced frontline workers. Senior managers remain resolute in their commitment to recruit able and committed social workers, who will continue to provide high-quality services to the most vulnerable children and families.

The Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB)

The Local Safeguarding Children Board is outstanding

Executive summary

Merton's Local Safeguarding Children Board (MSCB) is outstanding. It is highly effective in holding agencies to account for their individual safeguarding arrangements in the welfare and protection of children. The strength and maturity of the board are reflected in the established strategic arrangements and the high level of engagement across the partnership and with other strategic boards. The board benefits from decisive strategic leadership by the independent chair and a highly competent business manager. The board is well attended by capable senior strategic leaders who can influence safeguarding in their individual agencies. The contribution and participation of the voluntary sector and lay members greatly enhance the effectiveness of the board's work within the wider community. There is effective communication between the chief executive, DCS, lead member and chair of the MSCB, and accountability for the work of the board is strong.

The board's strategic priorities are relevant and informed by detailed analysis of local need to target the most vulnerable children, including children at risk of sexual exploitation and extremism and children missing from home or care. There is a sustained commitment to and focus on the delivery of the board's safeguarding priorities, including families in which adult mental health, neglect, alcohol, drugs and domestic violence feature in children's lives. The safeguarding needs of children pervade the board's work and business and subgroup plans.

The systems and processes underpinning the work of the board result in the availability of detailed multi-agency performance information of frontline practice, including around the application of thresholds for intervention (known locally as Merton's Well-Being Model) and compliance with the pan-London child protection procedures. The board promotes a culture of continuous development. Learning from SCRs and learning improvement reviews (LiRs) is used to improve safeguarding practice and in the development of multi-agency policies. The routine and innovative use of single- and multi-agency case file audit means that the board can assure itself of the quality and impact of frontline social work practice and take decisive action to drive improvement. The collaboration of partners at both strategic and operational level allows for alerts and trends to be identified and acted on swiftly.

There is a comprehensive suite of training available and attendance is good. The impact of training is actively monitored to ensure that it remains relevant and impacts on raising awareness and changing behaviours in the protection of children. The contribution and participation of children and young people are actively promoted and used well in the design and delivery of training and the development of priorities. There are no recommendations for the MSCB.

87. The MSCB is highly effective. There are strong governance arrangements underpinned by established partnerships with other strategic boards, including the Health and Well-being Board, the Corporate Parenting Board, the Children's Trust and the Safer and Stronger Partnership. Strategic leaders, elected members and partners work collaboratively and focus relentlessly on what matters to children in keeping them safe and promoting their welfare. There is strong engagement between the chief executive, DCS and lead member; roles and responsibilities are clear and accountability is strong. Suitable measures are in place to strengthen the partnership further with the Adult Safeguarding Board.
88. The independent chair provides decisive strategic leadership and challenge to partners. The chair has been central and extremely influential in driving forward the board's priorities and is highly respected by partners. The maturity of partners' relationships is reflected in the mutual trust and respect shown to each other. This is reflected in the sustained focus on ensuring that children's welfare and protection are at the heart of their work. Members expect, receive and are open to challenge, as the board seeks assurance on individual agency safeguarding responsibilities. Partners' contribution to the work of the board is valued and acted on. This supports collaborative and effective working relationships.
89. The business manager is highly experienced and competent and actively monitors the risk and challenge log and drives the business plan forward. His detailed knowledge and experience of MSCB priorities and subgroup work plans is impressive. The work of the board also benefits from excellent business administrators. This supports detailed scrutiny in the monitoring and reviewing of the progress of plans. The establishment of the business improvement group two years ago has enabled additional rigorous scrutiny of the board's priorities and supports partners in challenging each other in delivering against their individual agency's safeguarding responsibilities, on time and to the highest standard.
90. The experience and expertise of board members are used exceptionally well in partners discharging their safeguarding responsibilities and in holding each other to account. This is a notable strength, which permeates the work of the board and subgroups, the impact of which is demonstrated through the maturity of the partnership in collaboratively working to deliver single and joint priorities. There is a shared vision to safeguard all Merton children and a sustained and unyielding commitment in driving forward MSCB priorities: Think Family, vulnerable adolescents and early help. The board's priorities are the result of rigorous analysis of local need and reflect learning from SCRs, LiRs and national issues. The subgroup plans are closely aligned to the board's priorities and crosscutting themes around vulnerable children, including disabled children and children at risk of sexual exploitation. The joint focus on families in which neglect features in children's lives is well managed.

91. The culture of openness across the partnership is established and embedded. This, coupled with effective systems and processes, makes for a powerful force in the board holding partners to account and in understanding the effectiveness and impact of the quality of services in safeguarding children. There is a strong engagement across the partnership, including with schools, the voluntary sector, faith and wider community groups on safeguarding issues. Members are drawn from a wide range of partners who hold strategic safeguarding roles in their agency, and are experienced and influential in their organisations. All partners make a proportionate financial contribution to MSCB.
92. Members, including lay members, actively drive the business planning priorities. Members receive appropriate induction training and are clear about their collective and individual responsibilities. The impact of joint work on increasing awareness and supporting change is well evidenced. The business manager is effective and determined in driving and supporting change within the community to promote and safeguard children.
93. The understanding and application of thresholds by partners are reviewed regularly to ensure that they remain fit for purpose. The influence of the MSCB in evaluating and scrutinising the application of thresholds across frontline practice, including early help, is far reaching and innovative. The routine and detailed audit of frontline practice, including single- and multi-agency case file audit, focuses on the evaluation of the quality of children's lived experience and progress and is exemplary.
94. The wide range of audit activity includes a recent comprehensive audit of private fostering and was undertaken to ensure that practice met required regulatory standards. A recent sexual abuse threshold audit report in October 2016, undertaken by the MSCB quality assurance group and involving the police, children's social care and early years services, effectively reviewed the quality of decision-making. A themed multi-agency audit of child sexual exploitation over a number of years helped the board to determine whether changes in safeguarding practice were sustained. This is an effective approach to evaluating practice and determining the long-term impact of joint work with this vulnerable group. The quality assurance subgroup effectively conducted an audit of the quality of decision-making and practice with regards to children when disability is a feature of their lives. The learning from these audits informs business planning and wider training needs, including joint training.
95. There is an exceptionally effective section 11 process. The incisive analysis through the annual peer challenge and review meeting process ensures appropriate and respectful challenge of partners' compliance with safeguarding standards and seeks assurance of impact on practice. All senior agency representatives attend these annual challenge sessions. Partners

spoken to by inspectors said that they found the process to be rigorous but supportive.

96. The terms of reference for the child death overview panel (CDOP) and all subgroups are clear and link well to the board's priorities. The recently established Merton CDOP, which had been a joint panel with a neighbouring authority, fulfils its statutory responsibilities. The rapid response team convenes within timescales. Membership of the board is at appropriate senior and strategic level. The panel sensitively and appropriately supports the engagement of families. The panel uses learning events well to drive improvement. For example, a presentation to health professionals covering a five-year review of the work of CDOP was received well. Information on trends in cases of child deaths, both locally and nationally, is distributed through articles and has included features on alcohol poisoning, child mental health issues and internet safety.
97. The MSCB Annual Report 2015–16 gives a clear commentary and assessment of the performance and effectiveness of services across the partnership. The report outlines progress in the reporting period and future challenges for the board linked to the Wood Review. Since the last inspection, the board has reconstituted itself, placing greater emphasis on quality assurance. It has sharpened its focus on prioritising work at a time of reducing resources to ensure maximum impact on the welfare and protection of children across the partnership. The report provides an overview of each of the subgroups against the work plans, including the CDOP, and in particular focuses on the SCR in respect of Child B published this year and the LiR for Child C. The report reflects clear links with other strategic boards, and current priorities for 2016–18 are made clear. The annual report is received by the leader, the chief executive, the Children's Trust and the Health and Well-being Board, enabling effective challenge on key areas of improvement.
98. The MSCB has an established learning and improvement framework with statutory partners. The board has recently endorsed a revised learning and development strategy and has aligned learning needs to the board's priorities. This ensures that safeguarding training, including multi-agency training across the workforce, is targeted at the appropriate level. The opportunity for learning through SCRs and LiRs is robust and clearly aligned to the board's strategic priorities, subgroup work plans and frontline practice.
99. There are detailed action plans following the recent SCR and LiR, which appropriately link to recommendations. Progress is closely monitored through the quality assurance subgroup and the business improvement group. The importance of joint working in protecting children and young people where mental health and neglect feature are key priorities of the board. There is increasing joint development work with the adult mental health trust, and a 'Think Family' coordinator has recently been appointed to strengthen strategic and operational integration across children's and adults' services. The impact

of neglect, which featured in the learning review of Child C, is underpinned by the MSCB multi-agency neglect strategy and implementation and action plan to ensure that neglect is recognised and that children's voices are heard and acted on.

100. The local authority uses learning from reviews to effect change. For example, the learning from an SCR in 2014, underpinned by joint research with education colleagues, has been effectively used to drive improvement by promoting a lower tolerance of chronic school absence. This has helped to identify vulnerable children, including children at risk of sexual exploitation and those missing from education or care. This effective joint approach is now established and embedded in practice. This demonstrates the direct link between learning and improving practice. It also reflects the commitment of the board to driving improvement. Social workers and other professionals who spoke to inspectors understand well the findings of reviews and learning from training.
101. The comprehensive range of high-quality, up-to-date policies and procedures are exemplary. These are regularly reviewed by the board and the business improvement group to ensure compliance and to ensure that policies are relevant. The board promotes a strong and transparent learning culture, setting high standards and drawing effectively on independent research. The promote and protect young people subgroup (PPYP) provides strategic and effective oversight of multi-agency policies, protocols and procedures regarding children at risk, including risk from sexual exploitation, radicalisation and extremism.
102. The board has access to a comprehensive suite of multi-agency performance information, which is monitored and regularly and actively scrutinised. Joint performance information is detailed and clearly aligned with audit activity and supported by commentary on progress. The good attendance of partners at MSCB and subgroup meetings supports effective analysis and challenge.
103. Listening to children's views permeates the board's work in ensuring their welfare and protection. The most recent joint annual conference for practitioners and managers, which focused on the complexities of domestic abuse, involved young people. The conference content underpinned the strategic approach to engage partners and professionals, and to raise awareness and understanding.
104. The voice of children and young people is actively encouraged, including through their attendance at MSCB meetings. One example is a research project on young people's views on safeguarding that was commissioned in partnership with the board and London South Bank University. The project took into account the views of 148 young people in secondary schools, including children subject to child protection plans. A training day was held in May 2017 to consider lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues, and those

questioning their sexuality or gender, and young people ran part of the programme. The event focused on mental health, transgender identity and hate crime. A shorter version of the event was recently presented to the board by young people from a local school.

105. There is close alignment between the training programme and strategic priorities, ensuring the effective targeting of programmes to drive improvement in safeguarding practice. Future training needs are identified through the extensive single and joint audit programmes and findings from SCRs, LiRs and national and local issues. Attendance is very good, and feedback at the point of delivery and three months later is sought to evaluate impact on practice and to inform future training needs.
106. The board is actively engaged with the 'Prevent' duty on radicalisation, which includes a wide range of partners, including the police, schools and early years settings, and faith, voluntary groups and the wider communities. MSCB guidance on safeguarding children and young people from the harmful messages of violent extremism and terrorism has been reviewed to ensure its current relevance. The guidance is clear and informs partners of their safeguarding responsibilities. It incorporates helpful lists for recognising risk and links to referral pathways for the MASH and the Channel programme, which focuses on providing support at an early stage to people who are identified as being vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism. The board has also consulted with a range of community groups, especially with regard to its strategy on female genital mutilation, which is reviewed appropriately through the policy subgroup.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences of children and young people who have needed or still need help and/or protection. This includes children and young people who are looked after and young people who are leaving care and starting their lives as young adults.

Inspectors considered the quality of work and the difference that adults make to the lives of children, young people and families. They read case files, watched how professional staff work with families and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care given to children and young people. Wherever possible, they talked to children, young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the local authority knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

The inspection of the local authority was carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

The review of the Local Safeguarding Children Board was carried out under section 15A of the Children Act 2004.

Ofsted produces this report of the inspection of local authority functions and the review of the Local Safeguarding Children Board under its power to combine reports in accordance with section 152 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

The inspection team consisted of six of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) from Ofsted and one Ofsted inspector.

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