



**MERTON SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN PARTNERSHIP**

**Annual Report 2020-2021**

## Foreword

This report covers the work of the Merton Safeguarding Children Partnership (MSCP) during the period April 2020 to March 2021 and reflects on what the Partnership achieved together on behalf of Merton's young residents throughout perhaps one of the most challenging periods for public services in recent history.

Though the COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly changed the world we live in, our responsibilities to ensure that policies to improve outcomes and actions to prevent harm, abuse and neglect to Merton's young residents were in place remained. Whilst the impact of the pandemic presented many new challenges to our work, the agencies within our partnership helped adapt to new ways of working together, finding solutions to problems to ensure that we could continue to help protect some of the borough's most vulnerable residents. The commitment from all agencies through these difficult times has been incredibly uplifting and we would like to thank all our partners for all their work and dedication across the year.

The 2020-21 year saw some significant changes to the way in which the Partnership has conducted its work. As the COVID-19 pandemic struck in spring 2020, and with it the first national lockdown and imposition of social and working restrictions, our partners and staff that work to support children and young people in the borough rose to the challenge of finding new ways to conduct their business and continue their vital work.

During this reporting period, the partnership also experienced some changes to its personnel. Over the course of the year the London Borough of Merton's Director for Children, Schools and Families, and Executive representative, successfully took up their new position as Chief Executive of the council, which led to a personnel change on the MSCP Executive board. In addition the

Independent Person resigned and, due to a directorate-wide restructure of London Borough of Merton's Children, Schools and Families directorate, there was an interim nature to the Partnership Manager role. With members of the new Business Support Team coming into place from during Q1 2021, we look forward to working with everyone supporting the Merton Safeguarding Children Partnership and seeing the Partnership build further on its 2020-21 successes.

The opportunity to look back over the 2020-21 year has given the Partnership a chance to reflect on what has worked well and which arrangements need to change to help us continue our work effectively and efficiently into the future, and discussions are well underway in this regard. As we, hopefully, emerge from the immediate effects of the pandemic, our Partnership looks forward to continuing our close working across agencies to make Merton a safer place for its young residents.

### **Gloria Rowland**

Chief Nurse, Southwest London CCG

### **Andrew Wadey**

Head of Safeguarding, Public Protection, South West BCU

### **Jane McSherry**

Director of Children, Schools and Families, London Borough of Merton

## WORKING TOGETHER STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

### What is a local safeguarding partnership? The Children's Social Work Act 2017 and Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018

The purpose of these local arrangements is to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, and also to work together to identify and respond to the needs of children in the area. The legislation shares the responsibility for these arrangements between the Local Authority, the Police and the Clinical Commissioning Group across an agreed geographical area [Merton].

Other 'relevant' agencies also have a duty to safeguard children and young people under the Children's Act 2004. A list of relevant agencies in Merton can be found at the end of this report.

The Local Safeguarding Children Partnership (Merton Safeguarding Children Partnership '**MSCP**') are responsible for Local Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews, formally known as Serious Case Reviews. This includes arrangements to identify serious child safeguarding cases which raise issues of importance in relation to the area, and for those cases to be reviewed under the supervision of the safeguarding partners. To read more about learning from case reviews and actions taken therefore to strengthen safeguarding arrangements and practice click [here](#).

The MSCP, as a multi-agency partnership, work to keep all children and young people safe in their homes and communities, and to fulfil their potential. The Partnership coordinates the work of

all agencies and ensures that this work is effective in achieving the best outcomes for Merton's children and young people.

2020-2021 was the first full year for the MSCP operating under the new statutory arrangements set out in section 11 of the Children Act 2004. Further information on the MSCP arrangements can be read [here](#).

### The Annual Report

At least once in every 12 month period, the safeguarding partners must prepare and publish a report on what the safeguarding partners and relevant agencies for the local authority area have done as a result of the local safeguarding arrangements, and outline how effective those arrangements have been in practice.

This report provides an overview of the impact of MSCP's work on the safety and wellbeing of Merton's children and families as well as an update against the partnership's key priority areas outlined in the partnership's business plan<sup>1</sup>. In addition, this report will provide an update on the Board's statutory functions in relation to the provision of multi-agency safeguarding training, and learning from serious incidents.

Finally, the report also looks at the ways in which the partners have sought and utilised feedback from children and families to inform their work and influence service provision.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mertonscp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/MSCP-Business-Plan-2019-21-Jan-20.pdf>

## **MSCP Priority Areas for 2020-21**

### **Early Help**

Early Help is part of a whole system approach and is based on a clear understanding of local need. Good early help will mean that children and their families will experience a high quality and coordinated service that meets their assessed needs and prevents issues from escalating into a safeguarding risk. The COVID-19 pandemic created great concern for hidden harms for children across the country, compounded by services being forced into closure or heavily reduced capacity due to social distancing regulations. This resulted in considerable rising need for Early Help support. The Partnership's priority was to ensure that there is clear coordination and quality assurance of early help; with effective integration between the Early Help and statutory services to ensure more integrated service delivery.

### **Think family: Domestic Abuse and Think Family**

During the pandemic many communities witnessed an increase in instances of domestic abuse. Our own intelligence suggests this was also the case for Merton families. In formulating our actions to identify and support children who are victims or witnesses to domestic abuse, we re-emphasised the need to work in a way that joins up approaches to working with families (both children and adults), so that families' needs are assessed holistically and there is a coordinated response to assessed needs.

### **Contextual Safeguarding**

The Partnership works with all agencies to ensure that there is a highly coordinated multi-agency and whole-council approach to a range of adolescent risks that occur in contexts beyond the family home (e.g. neighbourhood, schools, local shopping centres, youth venues etc.). These risks include child criminal exploitation, child sexual exploitation, serious youth violence, peer on peer abuse, harmful sexual behaviour and other overlapping forms of harm.

Contextual safeguarding was also identified as a key area in Merton local child safeguarding practice reviews (for example, Jason).

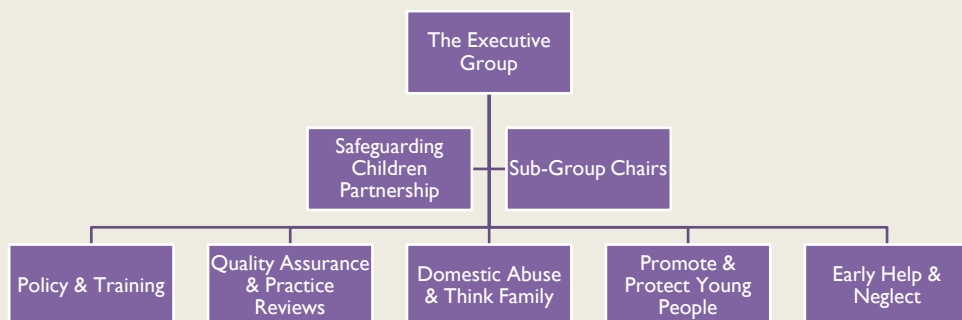
## **Governance and Oversight**

In May 2019, the MSCP formally adopted changes ushered in by the Social Work Act 2017. These are outlined in the MSCP's Partnership Agreement. Our updated Partnership Agreement can be found [here](#).

Business is conducted via MSCP meetings, sub-groups, correspondence and exchange of information between meetings. Business will be prioritised and organised in the Biannual Business Plan and functions delivered through Sub-Groups who meet quarterly.

Sub-groups develop work plans to carry out the business identified in the Business Plan and report on projects to the Merton Safeguarding Children Partnership. Every sub-group has an agreed Terms of Reference and is given delegated responsibility to act on the MSCP's behalf to progress the agreed Business objectives.

It is essential that members of the MSCP demonstrate their commitment to the Partnership by ensuring agency attendance to sub-groups and undertake specific tasks as agreed at meetings. Sub-group chairs also meet monthly to ensure that the work of sub-groups is coordinated and effective.



As part of the introduction of new partnership arrangements, the Partnership introduced three new posts with the aim of supporting the core duty to promote the welfare of children and monitor the strength of partnership working. These are:

- An Independent Person, to act as chair
- An independent scrutineer, and
- A Young Scrutineer

Following an extensive recruitment campaign, the Partnership appointed a chair and independent scrutineer who took up post in April 2020. The recruitment of a Young Scrutineer did not progress as well however, though as a priority for the 2021-22 year we were delighted to see this post filled. Alongside her role as Young Scrutineer, Halima Mehmood is also a Young Inspector for the London Borough of Merton, supporting the local authority with various projects such as a Young Residents' survey, COVID-recovery response and SEND service improvement. The Young Scrutineer role places a representative voice of Merton's young residents directly at the centre of the work of the MSCP.

## Priority 1: Early Help

One of the MSCP's priorities for the 2020-21 year was Early Help and Neglect, and a dedicated sub-group, made up of a range of partnership agencies progressed actions to improve our early help offer and response to neglect.

Early Help means picking up on any problems as soon as possible so they don't get too big, and working alongside families to put things in place to help them get better. As a partnership, we want to make sure children, young people and families in Merton can get the right help, in the right place, at the right time so that things do get better.

During 2020-21 we developed our Early Help Strategy 21-23. In the early stages of this work, we sought particular feedback from children, families and practitioners to help inform and shape the strategy's development. 38% of respondents were parent/carers; just under 40% were front line practitioners and almost 22% were managers or decision makers; there were responses from families living across the borough, with the majority being based in Morden and Mitcham, and the vast majority of respondents had children aged under 5 years.

- The vast majority of respondents shared very positive comments regarding their experiences of the support they received.
- The majority of respondents shared positive comments regarding their experiences of accessing support when they needed it, however some shared examples of having to wait to get responses or support from services.
- The majority of respondents shared positive comments regarding their experiences, though some told us that they didn't always know where to go to get support.

- We asked families to share their views and experiences on the impact that COVID and the associated restrictions had on their family, broadly the feedback provided fell into the categories below:
  - o Feeling socially isolated and unable to access support services
  - o Lost jobs and financially impacted
  - o Negative impact on family members mental health
  - o Difficulties managing children and young people behaviour

We have also used evidence and information from local and national data to develop our vision. As part of our Early Help strategy, we are now focusing on three priority outcome areas:

1. Not as many children and families require support from specialist services. Reduction in number of children in need.
2. More babies/children meet the expected stage of development for their age
3. More children/young people attend school regularly and fewer are excluded

During 2020-21, we also developed our Effective Support for Families in Merton model and guidance documents. These support practitioners to work alongside families to consider their needs and to identify the most appropriate support, empowering families to make positive and sustainable change and reducing the risk of needs escalating. Whilst development occurred throughout 2020/21 the new model was formally adopted during 2021/22.

[The Effective Support for Families in Merton model](#) is a tool used to support the assessment of needs of children, young people and families. The tool is aligned with the iThrive model to support our iThrive delivery. [The iThrive model](#) centres on the importance of early intervention and prevention, as well as mitigation for children and young people with complex needs. The iThrive model is all about ensuring children and young people enjoy good mental health and wellbeing and replaces the traditional 'tiers' approach with a needs-led service.

We are currently embedding our Early Help Strategy and Effective Support for Families in Merton into MSCP guidance. Multi agency training was developed over the 2020-21 year and regular training has been provided to the partnership via our training programme since April 2021 with good attendance from agencies across the partnership.

Early feedback from this training has been positive and encouraging with 100% of attendees feeling that the training was either very or extremely relevant to their role, and all respondents feeling confident in dealing with Effective Support in practice, and the majority feeling they would only need guidance in complex situations, and could successfully guide colleagues.

*"I am now informed of services available and what they offer as well as referral pathways and strategies for supporting parents which I could use in my role. I had heard some of the content at the DSL meeting earlier but this went into more depth."*

*"Yes I have further knowledge when to make referral and most importantly how to make a referral"*

*"Excellent course which laid out very clearly the new processes and indicators document. It was great to hear what Merton are doing to support families."*

## Priority 2: Domestic Abuse & Think Family

The MSCP works to support co-ordinated approaches to children who are at risk of domestic abuse with the aim of creating and sustaining a safe parenting environment, and retained a dedicated sub-group to Domestic Abuse and Think Family.

Merton's MARAC (multiagency risk assessment committee) is a panel that coordinates the partnership's response to the most complex/high risk domestic abuse cases using a range of statutory and non-statutory agencies.

In 2020/21 the MARAC considered 576 high risk and complex cases involving domestic abuse, 557 children were identified as part of these discussions.

There has been a continued increase in the number of cases discussed at MARAC between 2018-19 and 2020-21. The slight rise in repeat cases being seen by MARAC across the three reporting years also continued. The number children identified as in the household for 2020-21 is also the highest when compared to 2018-19 and 2019-20.

Figure 1: An overview of MARAC cases 2018/19 – 2020/21

Year	Number of Cases Discussed	Number of Repeat cases	% repeat cases	Number of children in the household
2018-19	369	133	36%	437
2019-20	410	162	39%	376
2020-21	576	234	41%	557

Partners have delivered a strong response to domestic violence over the period, initiatives have included:

### Independent Domestic Violence Advocates [IDVA's]

The work of Merton's IDVAs continued throughout 2020-21. Having introduced a case worker within the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub the previous year (now Children and Families Hub) the three IDVAs and Complex Needs IDVA in the community have seen an increase in case referrals.

The IDVAs role includes sourcing safe/emergency accommodation, referrals to Safeguarding and/or MARAC, accompanying service users to court, information provision around criminal justice system, signposting for legal advice including clients with no recourse to public funds, and emotional support. It is recognised that the IDVA role plays a pivotal role in supporting and managing domestic violence issues.

As a result of the pandemic, The One Stop Shop confidential weekly drop-in service for people experiencing domestic abuse was forced to close due to social distancing rules. However, it did manage to operate on a virtual basis during the pandemic and has since reopened.

The IDVA service received 691 referrals between April 2020 and March 2021, of which 397 were high risk. 78 of the total 691 referrals came from Social Care services. In addition, the MASH case worker received a further 25 new referrals.

### The Building Better Relationships Programme

This nationally accredited programme provides victim support by female safety officers and works with perpetrators of domestic abuse to reduce repeat offending. The pandemic has significantly impacted on the delivery of interventions although the programme has continued to be delivered, albeit on a much smaller scale, prioritising those assessed as the highest risk. Programme delivery is one of the priority strands of recovery from the pandemic, with BBR



and Resolve (a violence reduction programme) being particular priorities.

### Operation Encompass

Has been implemented successfully at a large number of schools in Merton and informs school settings of incidents of domestic abuse involving children on roll in order that Designated Safeguarding Leads and key staff are aware of this context when supporting and working with their children.

### Mental Health and Wellbeing

A range of services and support is in place, both pre-COVID and in response to the pandemic, to support the mental health and emotional wellbeing of children and young people. These include:

- a) **Trailblazers** - Mental Health Support available in Merton schools, linked to specialist teams. Support has been adapted to online provision for families, through on-line interactive workshops. The Trailblazers have had a positive impact on self-reported wellbeing and plans are underway to develop further schools-based services in the east of the Borough.
- b) **Catch 22 Risk and Resilience service** - Merton Catch 22 increases young people's engagement in diversionary activities that support reduction in the use of substances, and promote sexual health and positive health choices for young people aged up to 24-years-old. In response to COVID-19 the service extended its mental health and wellbeing interventions, widening Merton's school-based counselling for vulnerable children and young people; helping 22 students suffering with depression and anxiety, providing online counselling sessions throughout and sign-posting to relevant counselling support services. The service also provided outreach in partnership with Merton RESET, supporting 450 young people.

In response to COVID-19 and lockdown, a further on-line resource for parents, carers and young people was established across the South West London region as a one stop shop for emotional health and wellbeing. Merton also has two active counselling support offers:

- c) **Off the Record** - provides individual counselling and self-harm support to young people aged 11 to 25. In response to COVID-19 support included: extended on-line provision; weekly virtual walk-in emotional support sessions; webinars on topical issues related to the impact of COVID-19; and support when exam results were due.
- d) **Kooth** – providing online counselling provision for 11 to 22 year olds, including support for bereavement, the impact of lockdown, anxiety and impact on LGBT+ and BAME communities

### Training

Over the course of the 2020-21 year the MSCP Training programme also delivered six Domestic Violence and Abuse virtual training courses, totaling 55 learners; the most highly attended training for the year. Being a priority for the 2021-22 year, as highlighted in the new Partnership Agreement, the training will continue to be rolled out to practitioners and partner agencies for the future.

## Priority 3: Contextual Safeguarding

The Partnership is committed to work with all agencies to ensure that there is a highly coordinated multi-agency and whole-council approach to a range of adolescent risks that occur in contexts beyond the family home (e.g. neighbourhood, schools, local shopping centres, youth venues etc.). These risks include child criminal exploitation, child sexual exploitation, serious youth violence, peer on peer abuse, harmful sexual behaviour and other overlapping forms of harm.

Trends in the borough highlight increasing risks to young people related to contextual factors. Our data tells us that contexts of harm have been primarily centred in locations, family and peer network contexts. Compared to last year, there has been a rise in the family context relating to 'push' factors (e.g. young people who have been victims of abuse, from households where domestic violence or substance abuse feature, parents with high levels of vulnerability or family breakdown) which then lead to exploitative and coercive controlling environments.

**Figure 2: Gender split of Initial Referrals to MARVE by type – 2020-21**

Financial Quarter	20/21 Q1	20/21 Q2	20/21 Q3	20/21 Q4	Total
Female				1	1
Male				1	1
CCE – Female		1		1	2
CCS - Male	6	6	6	8	26
CH - Male	1				1
CSE - Female	7	5	2	3	17
Missing - Female	1		1		2
SYV - Female			1		1
SYV - Male	1	1	1		3
<b>Total</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>54</b>

In Merton, the majority of victims of sexual exploitation are female, while criminal exploitation is mainly associated with boys. Both forms of exploitation are strongly associated with peers and networks.

Merton has witnessed a rise in county-lines drug dealing since 2016. Mapping of these young people identified common issues such as older siblings / cousins involved in criminal behaviour, additional education needs and family vulnerabilities. In some cases parents have admitted to giving up reporting their children as missing, particularly when they turn 16 years old.

Merton experienced a rise in reports of sexual assaults. In some cases, relationships were initiated in schools but abuse has occurred in various locations (e.g. local parks), occasionally in young people's homes. Re-offending rates have risen and custodial sentences for knife crime and serious offences increased – in some cases due to long-standing cross-border issues and gang violence. Whilst small in number, the borough has experienced significant spikes in serious youth violence in the past.

Merton's Children Social Care was successful in its bid to be a part of the [London Scale Up project](#) to develop contextual safeguarding systems across the borough. This has resulted in pilots of contextual harm assessments and a review with development of new protocol, guidance and tools to intervene and assess contextual harm. This brings together all the presenting needs of exploitation (coercion/control), missing, online harm, violence/offending, sexual and harmful sexual behaviour, mental health and wellbeing, and substance misuse, in one assessment matrix alongside an assessment of contexts (places/spaces, professional engagement, schools, peer network, family and child).

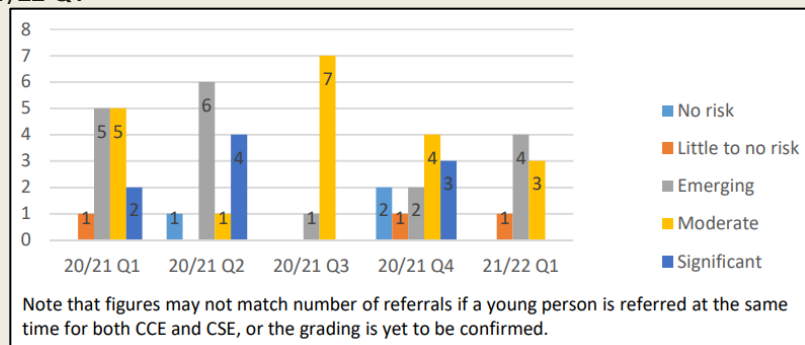
In addition to operational innovations the partnership oversaw the development of a multi-agency Contextual Safeguarding Strategy. The Strategy and the progress of its action plan are overseen by the MSCP's **Promote and Protect Young People Sub-Group**, which played a key part in the strategy's development.

New thinking has been prompted, both nationally and locally, by the abduction and murder of Sarah Everard and the establishment of the 'Everyone's invited' online platform for testimonies of sexual harassment, abuse and misogyny in schools. In response to these emerging themes, with oversight from the MSCP's **Promote and Protect Young People Sub-Group**, the LBM School Improvement Team led on work to refresh the model Safeguarding and Child Protection policy for schools, to ensure there is strong enough reference to peer on peer abuse; provide a model Peer on Peer Abuse Policy for schools to use; offer training on peer on peer abuse to school staff, including Designated Safeguarding Leads, secondary school staff more generally, governors, and inclusion leads, and briefings for head teachers.

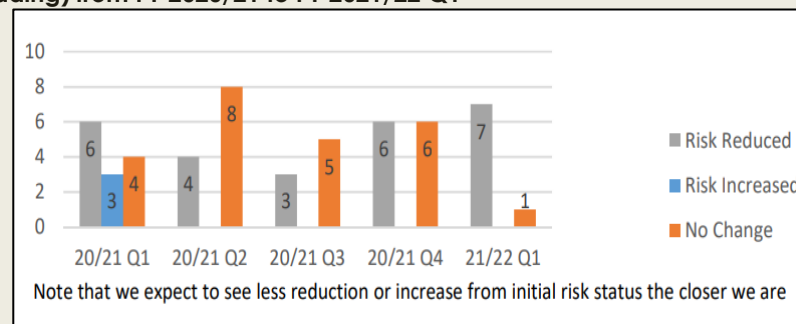
In 2020/21, the **MARVE Panel** (Multi-agency Risk, Vulnerability and Exploitation panel for child sexual (CSE) and criminal exploitation (CCE)) continued to provide robust multi-agency oversight. At monthly meetings, it considers referrals for young people at risk of all forms of exploitation. The panel is chaired by the South West Business Command Unit [SWBCU] often those young people referred to the MARVE are open to police and are at risk of contextual harm.

In 2020/21 the MARVE panel received 45 referrals, of these 26 were CCE initial referrals and 17 were CSE initial referrals, with two CCE re-referrals over the year.

**Figure 3: No. of MARVE referrals by Initial Grading (CSE & CCE) During FY 2021/22 to FY 2021/22 Q1**



**Figure 4: No. of MARVE cases by change in risk status (between initial grading and last grading) from FY 2020/21 to FY 2021/22 Q1**



At strategic level, the MSCP's **Promote and Protect Young People sub-group** has oversight of this priority. The sub-groups strategic oversight has been strengthened by the development of more robust data and performance monitoring. This has been used to help professionals understand what risk outside of the home looks like for young people and adolescents in Merton.

The focus for 2021-22 will be further embedding the Contextual Safeguarding Strategy and a toolkit of assessment and planning tools with guidance for social workers. A further focus of the year will be developing and establishing the new Multi-Agency Child Exploitation (MACE) panel to replace MARVE, as outlined in the [Pan-London Child Exploitation Operating Protocol \(2021\)](#).

## Impact of MSCP on outcomes for children

In October 2020 Ofsted considered the local authority's arrangements for children who need help and protection. The visit was in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors found:

*The most vulnerable children and families in Merton have benefited from a high level of protection and support throughout, and despite, the COVID-19 emergency. Nearly all children and young people in Merton's care have continued to make good progress and have been protected. Children's services staff, schools and partner agencies have worked together very effectively to enable the most vulnerable children and children in care to continue to attend school. Dedicated and skilled children's services staff have gone to great lengths to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on children and families in Merton. In turn, staff have been very well supported by senior leaders and managers... **An already strong safeguarding partnership provided very regular robust oversight and challenge, both operationally and strategically.***

Referring to the Partnership, inspectors found:

*Multi-agency work to safeguard children and to promote their welfare is highly effective. Meetings are well attended, and attendance has improved further during the pandemic. Online meetings have facilitated, and been enhanced by, the attendance of general practitioners. Core groups carefully explore the progress of plans to improve children's circumstances and the capacity of parents to achieve meaningful change. Decisions to step cases up when concerns escalate or to step cases down when concerns diminish are largely appropriate and proportionate in order to safeguard and protect children at risk of harm.*

Inspectors also recognised that the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) had "adapted quickly to online working, and the anticipated increase in referrals... has been managed well."

Other key feedback included:

- Evidence from case discussion, the review of records and discussions with partners, including schools, is overwhelmingly positive about Merton's strong, effective and child-centred response to the pandemic
- Strategy meetings are held promptly... to consider the risk of significant harm faced by children. The meetings are well attended by a wide range of relevant agencies, in addition to health and police partners. This enables rich information to be generated about the children and their circumstances.
- There are clear processes for identifying children missing education, and appropriate checks are undertaken with a range of agencies to establish if children have a school place or if they are not in receipt of a suitable education.
- Safeguarding risks to older children outside of the family home are recognised at an early stage... However, work to address risks from criminal exploitation is not consistently demonstrating impact. Senior managers have already identified that the response to criminal exploitation requires strengthening, and they plan to develop a contextual harm team within the safeguarding service.
- Arrangements for keeping in contact with children have been very well managed during the COVID-19 restrictions... Many children have had more frequent contact with their social workers during the recent period.
- The multi-agency partnership demonstrates a strong, shared commitment to support and protect children and young people. Effective partnerships with schools, including frequent communication, help to safeguard children and to promote attendance.

As at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021, 186 Merton children were subject to a Child Protection. This compares to 91 on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020.

## Looked After Children and Care Leavers

When a child comes into care, the council becomes their 'Corporate Parent', the term means the collective responsibility for providing the best possible care and safeguarding for the children in our care.

Children in Merton are less likely to be in care when compared to other boroughs. On 31<sup>st</sup> March, 154 Merton children were in care (24 of which were unaccompanied asylum seeking children). This equates to 2021, 30 out of every 10,000 children in Merton are in care, compared to 47 in London and 67 nationally.

More boys are in care than girls (55% vs 45%). We also know that proportionally more Merton children enter care at a later age when compared to London and national averages. Black, African, Caribbean or Black British children are overrepresented when compared to Merton's general population (under-18). On the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021, 25% (36) of children were of Black, African, Caribbean or Black British ethnicity. Whilst the proportion has increased, the overall number has decreased from 45 in 2019-20.

The total number of children who started to be looked after during year ending 31 March 2021 is lower than 2019-20 from 154 to 100 children. The number of children in care who are unaccompanied asylum seekers is also slightly lower from 29 to 17 children in care.

There are many reasons why a child may become looked after, in Merton for 2020/21 the principle reason was due to abuse or neglect, which decreased from 72 to 21 (40%).

Absent parenting is the second biggest reason why a child became looked after in 2020/21 affecting 36% (n19) of all children becoming looked after, a small reduction from 2019/20 at 22% (n34) respectively.

Health services for Looked after Children in Merton are provided by Epsom and St Helier NHS Trust (ESHHT) and Central London Community Health Care Trust (CLCH). The Looked after Children's health team has demonstrated a strong performance rating in regard to the delivery of initial and review health assessments.

- 99 review health assessments (RHAs) were completed in 2020-2021
- 95% of one year statutory review health assessments were completed above the national figure achieved of 91%.

Where children are placed in foster care, there is a trend of more children being placed in foster care outside of the borough than in Merton. Despite a reduction of out-of-borough placements last year, children placed outside of Merton increased from 61 to 93 (65%). [Merton's Corporate Parenting Strategy 2019-22](#) offers an overview of strategic multi-agency priorities.

*The physical, emotional and mental health needs of children in care and care leavers are a priority. The health of nearly all children and young people in care is thoughtfully considered and they benefit from a wide range of appropriate support services. These include embedded child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), which are quickly mobilised when required. Almost all initial health assessments have continued to take place within set timescales, and more children than expected have chosen to engage in their review health assessments. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children benefit from specialist support, including services to address the impact of trauma. -*

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## Learning from case reviews

During 20/21, the partnership oversaw the publication of one Serious Case Review<sup>2</sup> as well as to progress local child safeguarding practice reviews on three further incidents (Child F/Jason, Baby Grace, and Child H/Ananthi). We also progressed a partnership review on Child E/Eddie. In addition, there was one Rapid Review (Child I), which did not progress to a local child safeguarding practice review.

### Child F / 'Jason'

The events surrounding 'Jason' led the MSCP to commission a Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review (LCSPR). Jason had been missing for the first two weeks of April 2019, during which time he was involved in selling drugs (county lines) in a large town many miles from his home. On his return he presented as traumatised and disclosed that he had been assaulted and threatened that he would lose his life by those organising the drug-selling. He was highly anxious about his safety. The day after, Jason was taken to hospital after being stabbed in his leg and back.

On 13th June 2019, MSCP decided that these events met the Working Together 2018 criteria for a local child safeguarding practice review. Having engagement with Jason throughout the process was a great asset to this practice review, with his feedback and valuable contributions helping to inform our learning and shaping the subsequent development of the report. His words are a stark reminder of the importance of early intervention, asking, "*Why did it take me to get stabbed to get help?*"

On 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2020, the MSCP held a practitioner learning event to ensure that learning from the Jason report was shared with those practitioners and services who were involved with Jason and his family.

### Baby Grace

Grace died in 2017, aged one month. Post-mortem forensic evidence showed that she had been shaken on three separate occasions and had 27 fractures. In November 2020, both her parents were found not guilty of murder, but both were convicted of causing or allowing the death of a child.

After the parents were charged with murder in Spring 2019 the Merton Safeguarding Children Partnership agreed to commission this review to learn lessons and to ascertain if any changes to local systems were required, as a result.

The main lessons were identified as:

- How agencies help (new) parents to manage possible stresses and triggers which may lead to shaking a baby
- How agencies involve fathers in ante-natal and post-natal assessments and care; and
- How agencies assess possible risk of domestic abuse through routine enquiry and other measures.

On 15th September 2020, a practitioner learning event was held with practitioners and services involved with Baby Grace and her parents.

### Child H / 'Ananthi'

On 30 June 2020, emergency services were called to an address where a woman and 5-year-old child were found with serious injuries, stab wounds. They were both admitted to hospital. The child was in cardiac arrest when found and was pronounced dead, but the woman underwent surgery for her injuries. Ananthi was described by her father as '*a lovely child. She was very confident at cycling, and*

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<sup>2</sup> This review was undertaken under Working Together 2014 given the date of Child D's death.

*you were going to remove the stabilisers on her bike. She was good at school and liked learning spellings and doing well in spelling tests.'*

Due to the nature of the death of the child, Merton Safeguarding Children Partnership commenced a rapid review to identify learning for any services involved with the family. A decision was then made to undertake a Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review, which will be progressed during 2021-22.

### **Child E / 'Eddie'**

In May 2019, a child, referred to in this review as 'Eddie', took an overdose of 9 Ibuprofen following an argument with a friend on the phone and following negative comments from his father. Following a Critical Incident Notification from the Youth Offending Team, this was escalated to the MSCP Quality Assurance Sub-Group and then to Statutory Partners to consider whether the incident met the criteria for a Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review under Working Together 2018. At an Extraordinary Meeting of the MSCP in June 2019, it was agreed that the case did not meet the criteria for a LSCPR but did warrant further investigation through a Partnership Review.

On 20<sup>th</sup> November 2020, the MSCP held a practitioner learning event to share learning from the review the practitioners and services involved with Eddie and his family.

### **Child I (Rapid Review)**

Child I as 15 years old at the time of the incident, and a looked after child in Merton. He was admitted to hospital with initial presentation of intoxication and inability to maintain his own airway. On discussion with the foster dad, he reported that Child I had had contact with his biological parents in recent weeks, and his behaviour had become more erratic.

The Rapid Review meeting was used to identify actions required by agencies to ensure Child I's safety. Increased placement

support was provided to Child I and his foster carers such as CAMHS and CCE (child criminal exploitation) support. A contextual safeguarding tool was discussed with Child I to help him reflect on the supportive and non-supportive influences in his life.

At the conclusion of the Rapid Review held later that month, it was decided that the incident did not meet the criteria for a Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review, and the National Panel agreed with the decision.

### What we did in response to the reviews

The MSCP took a range of actions in response to all of the reviews outlined above.

- In addition to final reports for each review, the chair and lead author for each review helped develop a training pack/briefing note for dissemination across the partnership. These training packs were shared across the agencies and are published alongside the full reports on the [MSCP website](#). For each of the reviews we held a multi-agency Practitioner Learning Event to share learning with practitioners and services involved with the families. In furtherance, to ensure that the learning from each review could be effectively sustained, the MSCP will be introducing a series of virtual 'Lunch and Learn' events in 2021 that provides report writers and practitioners the opportunity to explore the themes and recommendations from the reviews, and embed the learning into their future work and practice. The programme of 'Lunch & Learn' events is currently planned throughout the 2021/22 financial year and impact will be reported in the next annual report.
- The learning from the practice reviews has directly impacted on the strategic work of the MSCP and its training programme. For example:

- In response to the Jason and Eddie reports, the MSCP has developed its work on contextual safeguarding (as highlighted above), culminating in a strategy, updated guidance and tools, and a workplan owned across partners. Contextual Safeguarding training will also be further developed to support implementation in 2021-22.
- The practice reviews highlighted the importance of addressing trauma, and recommendations around trauma-informed approaches were made in both the Eddie and Jason reports. As a result, the CCG has funded CAMHS to deliver trauma-informed training to the MSCP to help embed trauma-informed approaches.
- In response to Baby Grace, the MSCP has been promoting the ICON programme. Health partners have shared learning from the Baby Grace report, for example, at the GP leads safeguarding forum in March 2021 and are planning targeted training on 2021-22 on issues arising from the review, for example, having difficult conversations and routine enquiry. Issues from the review will also be included in the MSCP's regular Domestic Abuse training, delivered quarterly.



## MSCP Training

### Training Programme 2020/21

During 2020/21, the MSCP's training programme was delivered according to the MSCP 2020/21 Learning and Development Strategy, which was overseen by the Learning and Development sub-group (later Policy and Training sub-group). However, delivery of the strategy and the MSCP training programme was impacted by the pandemic and turnover of staff in the Business Support Unit, and this is reflected in the lower number of events held across the year. However, the MSCP acted quickly to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic and ensure that partners could access resources, advice and training.

During the first week of the pandemic, the MSCP updated its website with a video and training resources around child safeguarding and domestic violence and abuse. Since May 2020, the MSCP have been delivering a comprehensive virtual training programme. The training programme is mostly delivered in house, by a range of partners across the MSCP. Courses and training themes are derived from sub-group work plans and recommendations (via Policy & Training Sub-Group), as well as from learning from case reviews.

Alongside the deletion of the dedicated training post, the MSCP Business Support Unit has experienced significant disruption during 2020-21 with a high turnover of staff.

These staffing issues, alongside the disruption from the pandemic, have impacted on the delivery of the training programme – 22 separate events, and 28 occurrences were delivered in 2020-21, compared to 28 separate events, and 77 occurrences in 2019-20. 222 professionals attended training in 2020-21 compared to 601 in 2019-20. It is also possible, due to turnover of staff, that some of the recording processes have been inconsistent, leading to some

discrepancies in these figures. It is expected that attendance numbers for 2021-22 will return to pre-pandemic levels based on attendance reports at time of writing.

There was also no annual conference in 2020-21 due to disruption caused by the pandemic, which is likely to have also affected numbers. However, the MSCP does have plans in place to deliver a joint conference with the Adults Board in 2021/22, as well as an Early Help Summit.

There is a wide-ranging training programme including training on:

- Honour Based Violence
- Child Protection Refresher (x2)
- Domestic Violence and Abuse (x6)
  - Exploitation and Gangs (x2)
- Impact of parental mental illness on children and young people (x2?)
- Impact of weapons/criminality on young people
  - Introduction to child protection
    - LADO training
- Race, culture and belief systems in safeguarding children (x2)
  - Substance Misuse Part 1 (x2)
  - Substance Misuse Part 2
  - Trauma Informed Practice (x3)
  - Understanding and managing neglect
- Use of social media and impact on adolescents
  - What is sexual violence

### Impact of our Training Programme

During the 2020/21 period, the MSCP offered 22 separate events and a total of 28 occurrences. We offered a total of 480

training places; we had 282 bookings and 222 attended, an attendance rate of 79%.

The services with the highest number of attendees at MSCP training events during 2020/21 were London Borough of Merton Children Schools and Families and Children's Social Services, St. Georges Hospital, Health Central London Community Healthcare Trust (CLCH), the Voluntary and Community and Faith group sector (VCS) and Education (schools, colleges and nurseries).

The most well attended courses were Domestic Violence and Abuse (55), Trauma Informed Practice (43) and Child Protection Refresher (35).

### **Evaluation**

The Learning and Development sub-group (later Policy and Training) developed a Training Evaluation and Impact Analysis framework, as endorsed by the London Board as good practice. This was to ensure the training programme contributes to improving the knowledge and skills of the workforce with regard to working together to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. This meant that evaluation should include the following:

- Relevance, currency and accuracy of course content
- Quality of training delivery
- Short and longer term outcomes; and
- Impact of working together and inter-professional relationships

Evaluation forms for MSCP training were reviewed to reflect these criteria and a limited number of evaluations were returned during the year. However, a priority for 21-22 will be encouraging more returns of these evaluation forms to ensure that the MSCP can monitor the impact of training on the multi-agency workforce. Evaluation forms are provided across all MSCP training sessions. The

MSCP has made it conditional to complete an evaluation form in order to receive a learning certificate, to encourage completion.

The themes, content and scope of the MSCP training programme, and the sub-group workplans, is developed with a close association to the multi-agency data and its analysis. From the 2021-22 year, each of the sub-groups conduct performance monitoring as standing items on their agenda in a move to ensure that trends and themes identified are better developed, understood and responded to. Where training gaps are identified the Business Support Unit will work with the Policy and Training sub-group towards finding suitable training.

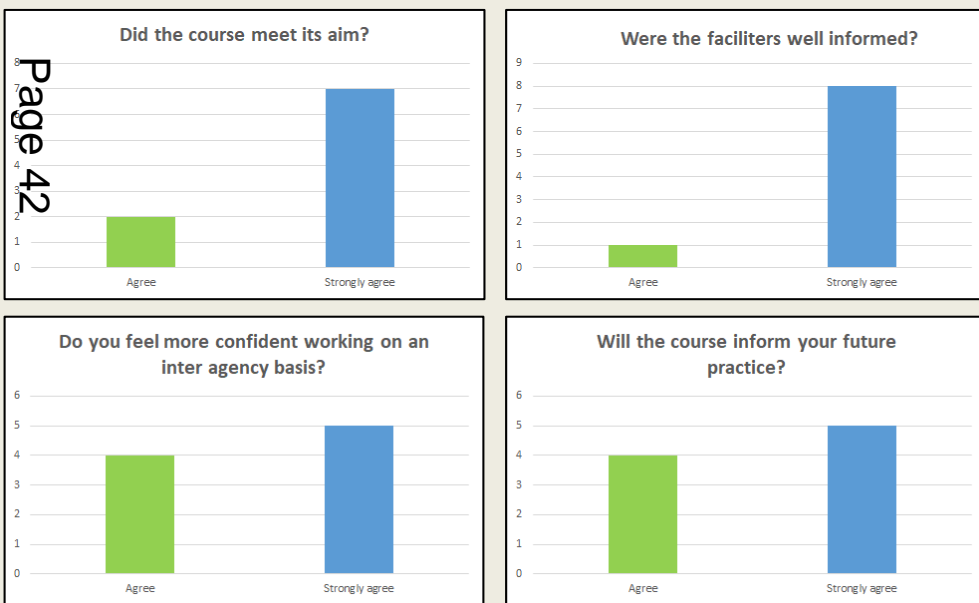
**Figure 6: MSCP Training attendance (20/21) by event**

Event	Occurrences	Bookings	Cancellations	Attended	Waiting List
'Honour' Based Violence - Virtual session	1	20	2	20	8
Child Protection Refresher Virtual Session	2	37	2	35	14
Domestic Violence and Abuse - Virtual Session	6	63	7	55	0
Exploitation and Gangs	1	3	1	3	0
Impact of parental mental illness on children and young people - virtual session	1	15	2	14	0
Impact of Weapons/Criminality on young people	1	3	2	3	0
Introduction to Child Protection Virtual Session	1	13	1	9	0
Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) training: Managing allegations against staff - Virtual session	2	10	2	7	0
Race culture and faith belief systems in safeguarding children - Virtual session	2	35	6	13	12
Substance Misuse Part 1	2	5	0	5	0
Substance Misuse Part 2	1	6	0	1	0
The impact of parental mental	1	0	0	0	0

illness on children and young people					
Trauma informed practice - Virtual session	3	55	15	43	6
Understanding and managing neglect - Virtual session	1	7	2	5	0
Use of Social Media and impact on Adolescents	1	5	0	5	0
What is sexual violence? Virtual training	1	5	3	4	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>282</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>222</b>	<b>40</b>

For our initial online events, the MSCP sought feedback from partners on how virtual delivery of the programme worked for them. 9 participants provided feedback between April 2020-March 2021, covering 6 of the offered courses. These participants represented a variety of organisations, including the Inner Strength Network, Clarion Housing, St. George`s, and the London Borough of Merton. At the time of writing, there has been a greater push in the 2021-22 financial year to encourage attendees to provide evaluations.

Overall, the feedback was positive and consensus was that online course delivery should be a part of the programme going forward. This feedback was reported to the Policy and Training sub-group during 2020.



The extensive multi-agency training offered is supplemented by single-agency training.

The MSCP's Policy and Training Sub-Group provided strategic oversight of this area of the partnership's work.

Comments from attendees on how the specific courses will inform their practice.
<b>"The nature of my work is case holding and working closely with the families who have concerns, the training would help me identify any signs which might be present."</b> - Feedback from Understanding and Managing Neglect
<b>"I would recommend most of health professionals working with the young people to take the course."</b> - Feedback from Exploitation and Gangs.
<b>"I have learnt there is a lot of support out there and working with multi agency to help safeguard children."</b> - Feedback from Impact of Weapons/Criminality on young people.
<b>"I will use this information to gain a better understanding of the support that the young people I work with can access."</b> - Feedback from Impact of Weapons/Criminality on young people.
<b>"It has given me more confidence in providing appropriate support and advice."</b> - Feedback from Honour-Based Violence

## Independent Scrutiny

MSCP's Partnership Agreement, details how scrutiny will take place via an Independent Scrutineer (IS) and a Young Scrutineer (YS). Their roles assesses how well organisations come together to cooperate with one another to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.

The IS began in post during February 2020. During 2020-21, a scrutiny plan was developed by the IS in partnership with the incumbent Independent Person and the Executive, This used best practice models for Independent Scrutiny including the 'Six Steps to Independent Scrutiny'. The activity during the year included; Scrutiny focused on review of local critical delivery plans, COVID arrangements and MSCP data, scrutiny work via MSCP partnership meetings, Executive group and thematic scrutiny of topics of concern. MSCP is also represented pan London by the IS.

A particular note was a thematic review carried out by the IS of MSCP responses to Non-Accidental Injury and Sudden Unexpected Death in Infants following concerns raised for infants during lockdown, by national sources and also in local MSCP review and quality assurance activities. This thematic scrutiny found specific areas of focus for MSCP to action. These included;

- Seeking further assurance from health providers about visits to families with newborns born during the pandemic, and their plans to address gaps
- Further deep dive audit of cases of NAI, include engagement with parents
- Consideration to adopt the ICON project<sup>3</sup>
- Improvements timeliness of reviews and learning.

The IS supported the recruitment of MSCP's Young Scrutineer, now in post.

Observations on MSCP during 2020/21 from the Independent Scrutineer

### Reflections from Independent Scrutineer

*"I became MSCP's Independent Scrutineer in February 2020 and was in post for the period covered by this Annual Report. This was a year of unprecedented crisis and challenge for Safeguarding Partners everywhere which impacted systems and processes to respond to the needs of children and families, this was no different in Merton. The Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown situations meant that practice had to be adapted to respond to protect those children and families facing increasing risks during the unprecedented times as well as to adapt to the unknown and frightening impact of the Covid-19 virus.*

*"It was evident through scrutiny activity and discussions that the partners in Merton worked well together during this time. This stretched beyond the boundaries of the borough to ensure a Southwest London collective effort to keep children safe. Ofsted visited the borough during the year as reported earlier and also found good practice in terms of the approach here.*

*"Challenges for partners were apparent and as is always the case with safeguarding, there was learning to be gained to improve practice. Tragic cases where children have been seriously harmed occurred in this period as identified earlier in the report and I have seen the partnership evolve its approach to priorities in response to such learning in an effective, practice led way. I observed peer challenge among the partnership where this was needed and added to this where it was felt further scrutiny was required, for example in terms of preventing non accidental injury to babies which is of rising local and national concern. During this year I have witnessed*

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<sup>3</sup> <https://iconcope.org>

partners' effective collaboration in terms of identifying and developing action to strategic and operational risks to children's safety.

*“MSCP itself experienced a period of instability during this year as a result of turnover of staff holding the 3 executive partnership lead roles and the partnership manager post. Consistency was provided to the partnership by local senior leaders and with interim arrangements in place where necessary, however the combination of this and the impact of the pandemic mean that some aspects of planned development work was held and is now progressing into this current financial year, for example in terms of engaging children, with the recruitment of our new Young Scrutineer. The Partnership have recognised stubborn challenges in terms of its priority areas, and this is evident in the continuation of work in these areas.”*

**Sarah Lawrence**  
**Independent Scrutineer MSCP**

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## Annex 1: MSCP Budget and Spend 2020/21

### MSCP Budget 2020-21 – Contributions by agency

London Borough of Merton	76,059
Merton CCG	55,000
Metropolitan Police	5,000
CAFCASS	550
London Fire Brigade	500
<b>Total</b>	<b>137,109</b>

### MSCP Spend 2020-21

	Spend	Budget	Variance
Staffing:			
<input type="checkbox"/> Salaries	86,796.98	91,505	-4,708.02
<input type="checkbox"/> Independent Posts	13,866.46	20,000	-6,133.54
Training	1,100	10,000	-8,900
Learning Reviews	12,604	2,604	10,000
Supplies and Services (Office costs)	12,421	13,000	-579
<b>Total</b>	<b>126,788.44</b>	<b>137,109</b>	<b>-10320.56</b>

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