



London Borough of Merton Corporate Parenting Annual Report 2022/2023

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I. Executive Summary

This report covers the reporting year April 2022 to March 2023. Children in care and care experienced young people are some of the most vulnerable and marginalised people in society. This reporting year we have noted the impact of cost of living on some of our most vulnerable members of society pushing them further towards the fringes. It is our duty as corporate parents to minimise this impact and shield our care experienced children and young people as much as possible, just as we would the children within our own family networks.

This report is an overview of Merton's Children's Services' performance in meeting the needs of our children in care and care experienced young people.

Highlights from the report are outlined below:

- Merton services to Care Experienced Children and Young People are overseen by a robust Corporate Parenting Board chaired by the CEO and attended by our care experienced young people, councillors, senior managers and partner.
- The overall number of children in care remained steady and remain well below the London and National averages.
- The first constellation of the Mockingbird Family Model of Fostering continues to thrive , with an increase of interest in the Mockingbird Family Model when recruiting new foster carers. The success of the fist constellation has allowed Merton to plan for a second and possibly third Mockingbird constellation
- We had a better year for fostering recruitment with 10 new households being approved up from 6 the previous year.
- Timeliness of Initial Health Assessments continues to be an issue which we are working with health colleagues to address. However, Merton's performance in the number of children with up-to-date review health assessments, dental checks, and strengths and difficulties questionnaire was good.
- Merton remains good at *keeping in touch* with our care experienced young people and ensuring that they are in appropriate accommodation. Our Corporate Parenting commitment is evidenced through the high numbers of care leavers remaining with their former foster carers and *staying put* arrangements. We continue to improve and perform well in comparison to other Local Authorities around the numbers of care leavers, particularly with our 19 –21 year olds we have in education, training, and employment.
- Merton's '*Our Voice*' continued to be a strong presence in ensuring that children's views influenced decisions by elected members and senior officers. They launched a new logo and had a number of trips, this year. Our Young Inspectors were successful in a bid to facilitate peer research as part of the Young Londoners Research Programme.
- An update on Coram Voice *Bright Spots Survey* was completed in March 2022; with a focus on *Your Life Beyond Care* and the *Children in Care* and family time. Following a successful bid, Merton joined the Staying Connected pilot delivered by Coram Voice. The project looks to creative ways in which councils can adapt practice so that children in care can have increased contact with their birth families, brothers and sisters

II. Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the services delivered to Merton's children in care and care experienced young people. The report covers the performance and

comparative data for the 2022/2023 reporting year.

The Corporate Parenting Board

The main purpose of corporate parenting boards is to ensure and monitor how the Local Authority are applying the 7 principles of corporate parenting set out in *Section 1 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017*¹. This legislation is accompanied by the DFE statutory guidance for local authorities - *Applying corporate parenting principles to looked-after children and care leavers*². The guidance encourages corporate parenting boards and local authorities to assess and monitor the quality of services through understanding the experience of the children and young people accessing them.

Merton's corporate parenting board is held 4 times a year; with a view to incorporate a 5th board that acts as an Away Day for the board and is comprised of care experienced young people, elected members, senior managers from across the council, the NHS, and the CCG. During this reporting year it was chaired by the council's Chief Executive, Hannah Doody, promoting a strong corporate parenting ethos across the Council and the wider children's partnership.

Context

This reporting year of 2022/2023 has been seen as a settling year following on from the recovery year caused by Covid-19. We know how quickly childhood goes and we have continued to aspire high for our children and young adults whilst focusing and maintaining outstanding practice. Continuous improvement is a strongly held value within the Corporate Parenting service and more than ever, the workforce demonstrated this over this reporting period.

In February 2023 the government published its strategy and consultation on children's social care Stable Homes Built on Love (SHBoL). This strategy for reform set out proposals in response to recommendations from Josh MacAlister's Independent Review (Care Review) of Children's Social Care (2022), the Child Safeguarding Practice Panel's National Review into Child Protection in England (2022) and the Competition & Markets Authority (CMA) Children's Social Care Market Study (2022). The proposals set out in 'Built on Love' to be backed by additional investment to existing spending over the next 2 years, and organised under 6 'pillars' of reform:

1. Family help provides the right support at the right time so that children can thrive with their families
2. A decisive multi-agency child protection system
3. Unlocking the potential of family networks
4. Putting love, relationships and a stable home at the heart of being a child in care
5. A valued, supported and highly skilled social worker for every child who needs one
6. A system that continuously learns and improves, and makes better use of evidence and data

We will continue to stay up to date with the upcoming changes in in guidance and strategy to

¹ [Children and Social Work Act 2017 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk)

² [Applying corporate parenting principles to looked-after children and care leavers - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

support the sufficiency of homes for children in Merton.

The year was seen out with a stable senior leadership group of Hannah Doody - CEO, Jane McSherry - Director of Children Life Long Learning and Families, Dheeraj Chibber - Assistant Director of Children’s Social Care & Youth Inclusion, and David Michael as Head of Corporate Parenting. Following the major restructure and pandemic related disruptions of the previous year, the Corporate Parenting service experienced a year of relative stability. The restructure achieved its desired outcomes in aligning services related to care experienced children & young people under the one Corporate Parenting Service, increasing the management capacity to deliver quality practice, and creating clear progression pathways for the workforce. The Corporate Parenting service has a mostly permanent workforce with a stable management team that came about due to promoting talent internal to Merton who understand Merton’s high aspirations for our children which led to the ‘Outstanding’ Ofsted rating following the February 2022 inspection.

Merton’s Pledge to our Children and Young People

Merton’s pledges are outlined in our Corporate Parenting Strategy 2022-2024 which is accompanied by an action plan that is monitored through the Corporate Parenting Board. Our pledges mirror the desired outcomes for all Merton’s young residents that were developed by our Young Inspectors and the Children’s Trust and published in the Children and Young People’s Plan 2019 – 23³.

Corporate Parenting Pledges	Children’s Trust Outcome
Your voice will be heard, what you say matters.	Getting involved, having a say.
You will have somewhere safe to call home.	Staying safe.
We will help you with your worries and fears.	Being Healthy
We will do the best we can to support you, so you can do your best at school, have hobbies, interests and time for fun.	Enjoying and achieving.
We will make sure you have people in your life who are important to you and someone you can trust.	My Merton.
We support you to learn how to take care of yourself and we will be there for you, if you need us, right up until you are an adult aged 25.	Becoming independent.

³ [Merton Children and Young People's Plan | Merton Partnership](#)

Corporate Parenting Performance Activity 2022-23

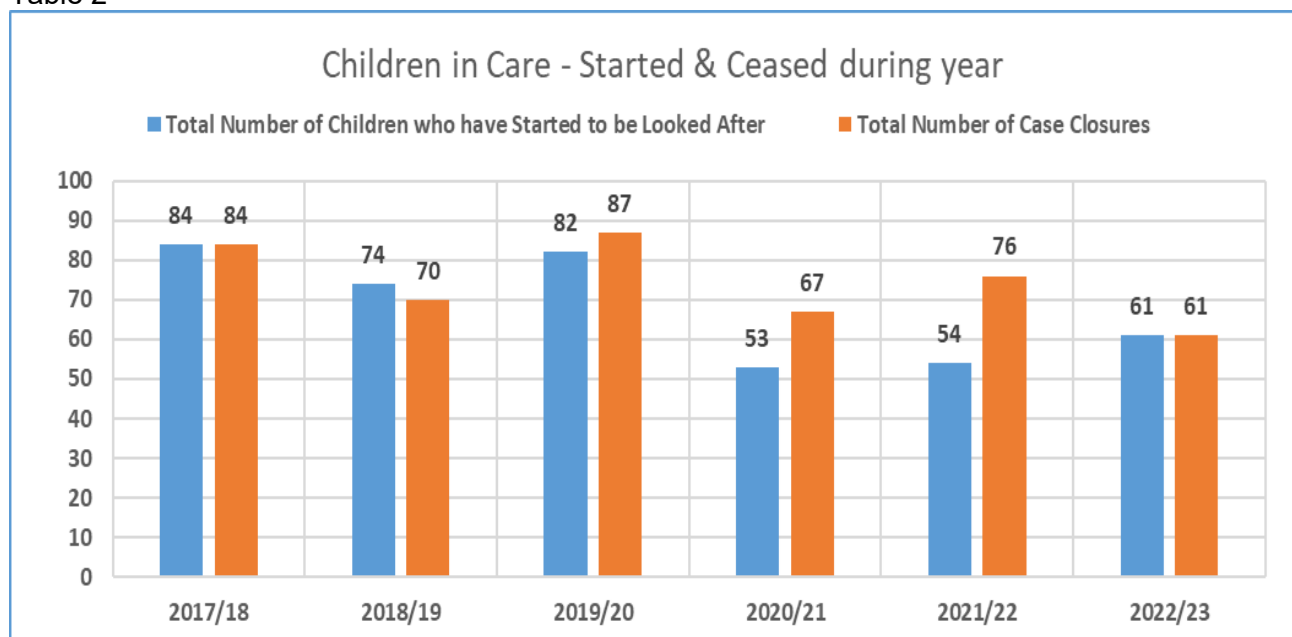
Table 1

Numbers and Rates of Children in Care as of 31st March

	2019		2020		2021		2022		2023	
	Number	Rate/10K	Number	Rate/10K	Number	Rate/10K	Number	Rate/10K	Number	Rate/10K
Merton	159	34	154	32	142	30	122	26	123	26
London	10020	52	10020	52	9640	50	9940	52	9710	51
National	78140	66	80000	68	80770	69	82080	70	83840	71

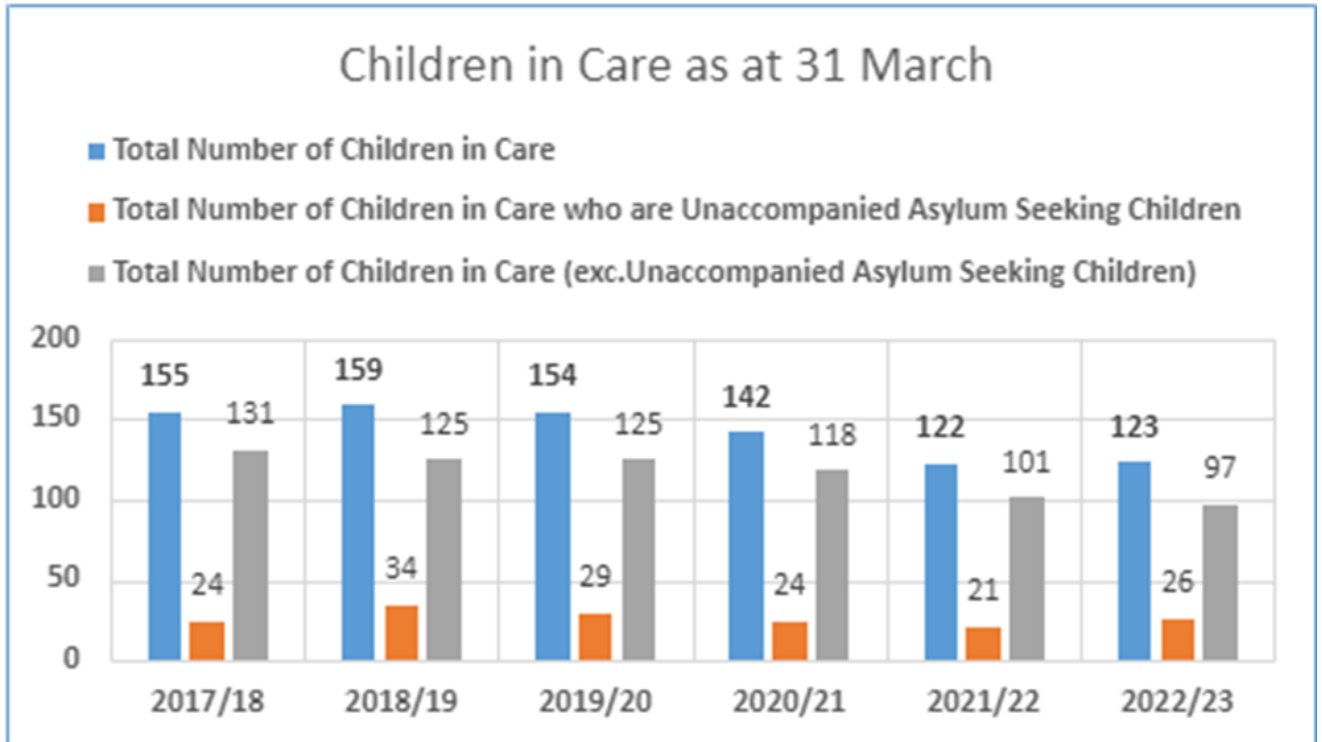
Up until 2020, the numbers of children in care had remained stable between 150-160. Between 2020 and 2022, the numbers decreased to 122 where they remained stable throughout this reporting year. Merton's rate of children in care per 10,000 children (26), remains lower than the London and National rates (51 & 71 respectively). Although the pandemic contributed towards the mentioned drop between 2020 to 2022 due to less unaccompanied asylum-seeking children entering care, but this drop also correlated with the implementation of Merton's Relationship based practice model. Merton's focus on supporting and enabling families to find solutions to ensure children grow up within their family networks, and only using care as a last resort, has resulted in less children entering care. The table below shows a general decrease in the numbers of children starting in the 2020/21 reporting year which correlates with the implementation of our practice model. Since this period it has stayed relatively stable. Various quality assurance work has also been undertaken due to the changes of pattern to ensure we are confident of our practice and children are being kept safe, entering care when threshold are met, whilst also exploring family networks and communities to look after children who may not need to remain in care.

Table 2



*It should be noted that this chart represents a count of individuals who have started / ceased care during the year and does not count multiple start or ceased dates for individual children.

Table 3



The table above shows the numbers separating out the unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. 2020/21 & 2021/22 saw the numbers decrease due to the pandemic. The numbers this year have risen but a significant, expected, increase was avoided due to the National Transfer Scheme becoming mandatory. This move by the Central Government followed the predicted increase in unaccompanied children due to the rising numbers of asylum seekers widely reported in the national press. The quota of how many unaccompanied asylum-seeking children councils have to accept also increased to 0.08 of the population. For Merton this meant an increase from 38 to 48 children. Merton remains well below our quota.

Table 4 below compares Merton with our statistical neighbours. We remain significantly lower than most the other boroughs in the table. All the London boroughs in the table (to note Reading is not a London LA) bar Enfield are below the London average of 52 per 10,000 children. Whilst there may be many contributing factors to this, we know that there is a strong link between poverty and involvement with children’s social care. Research from the most recent census Trust for London on poverty (2021) shows that Merton has the lowest rates of poverty in London.

Table 4

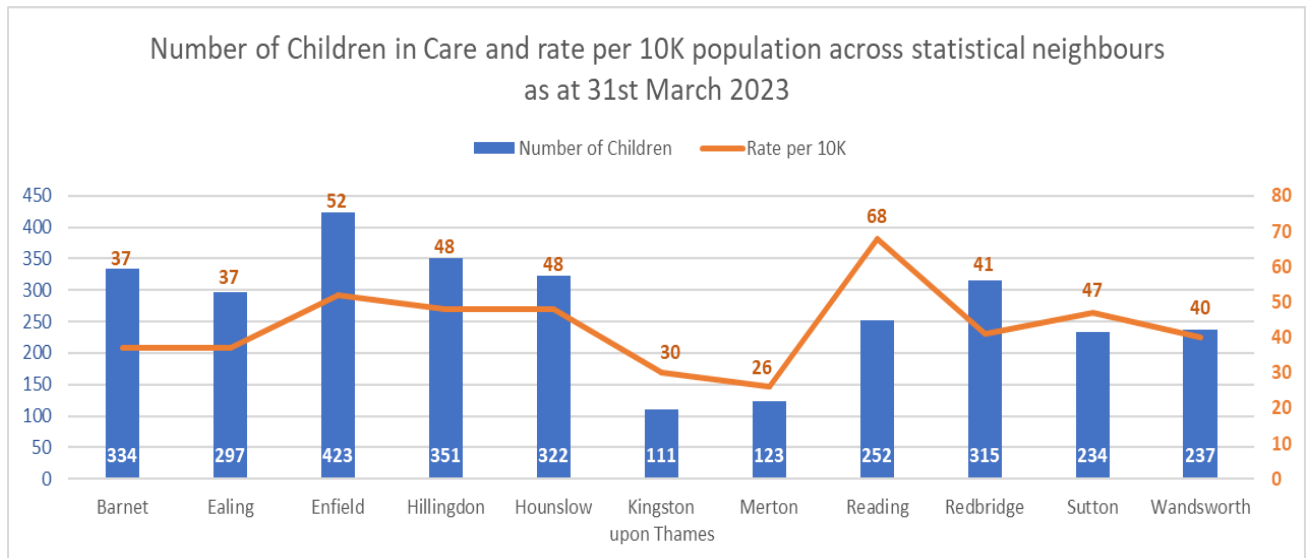
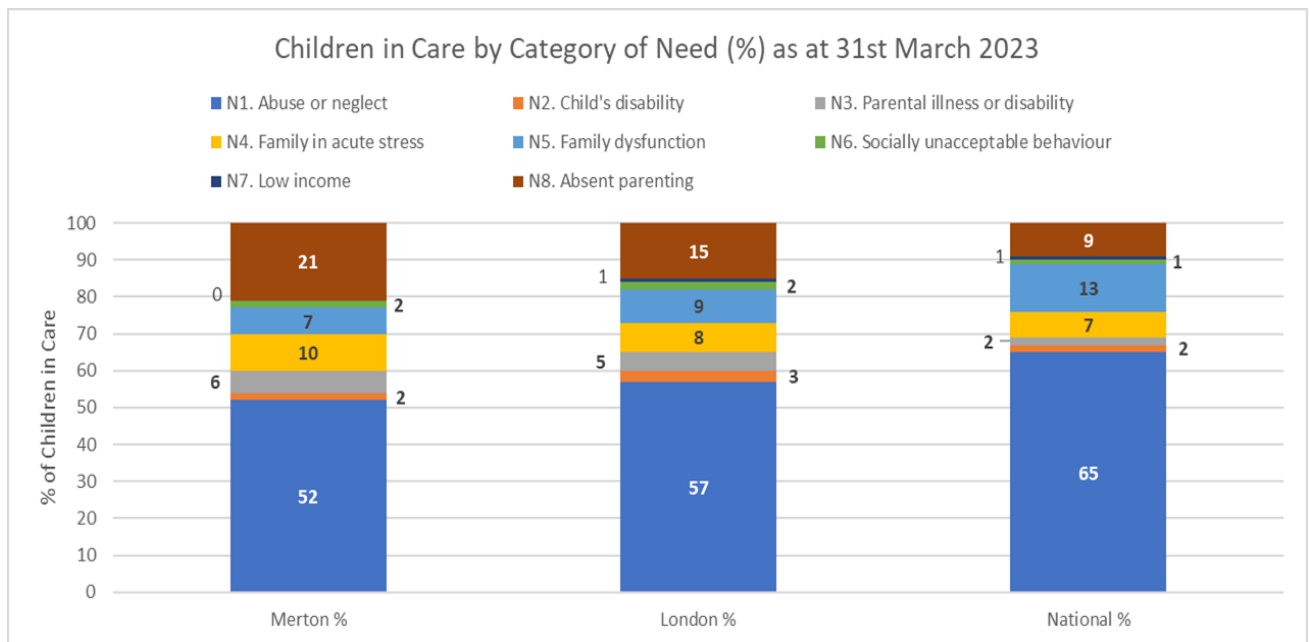


Table 5



The above is a comparative graph showing the reasons why children entered care. Merton is roughly in line with the London wide picture. The higher level of absent parenting is linked to the increase of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. There remains a significant difference between London and the rest of the nation around abuse and neglect and absent parenting. This is most likely due to the higher number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children accommodated by London boroughs which are recorded as absent parenting. Given that the National Transfer Scheme has now become mandatory, we may start to see this balance out over the next few years.

Table 6

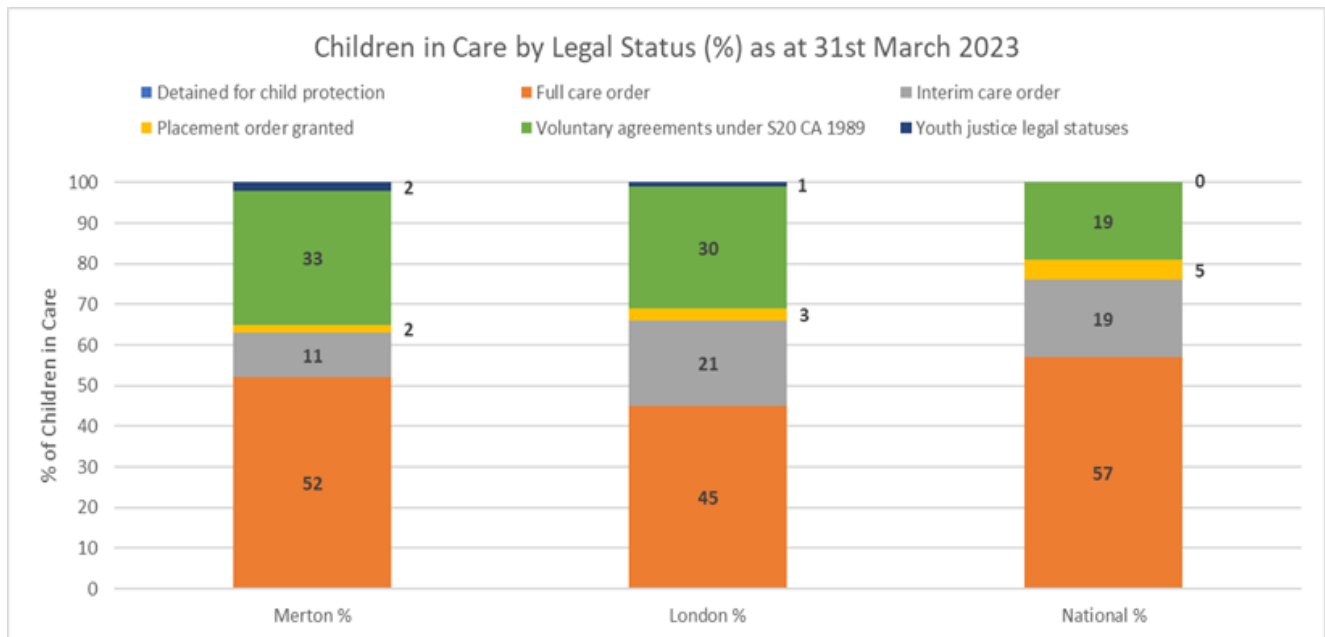
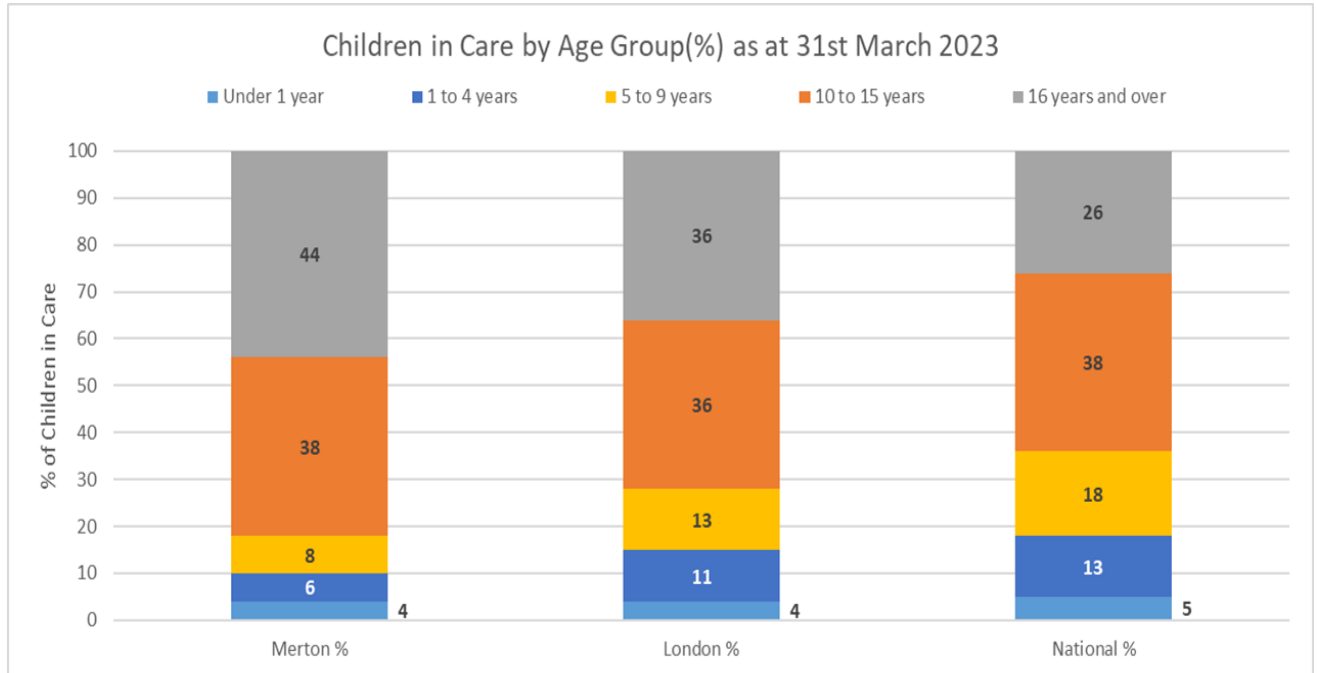


Table 6 shows that Merton had 11% interim care orders which is lower than the London (21%) and National (19%) average but ultimately shows a 5.3% rise in interim care orders from the previous year (5.7%). The disparity between London and Nationally around use of Section 20 is predominately around the higher number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children London accommodates. Table 6 shows that there has been a decrease in the number of Full care orders from 59% in previous year to 52%; where Merton remained higher than the London average. There has been a raise in children who have entered care under Powers of Police Protection or Emergency Protection Orders. This is a change for Merton which we will continue to explore and monitor.

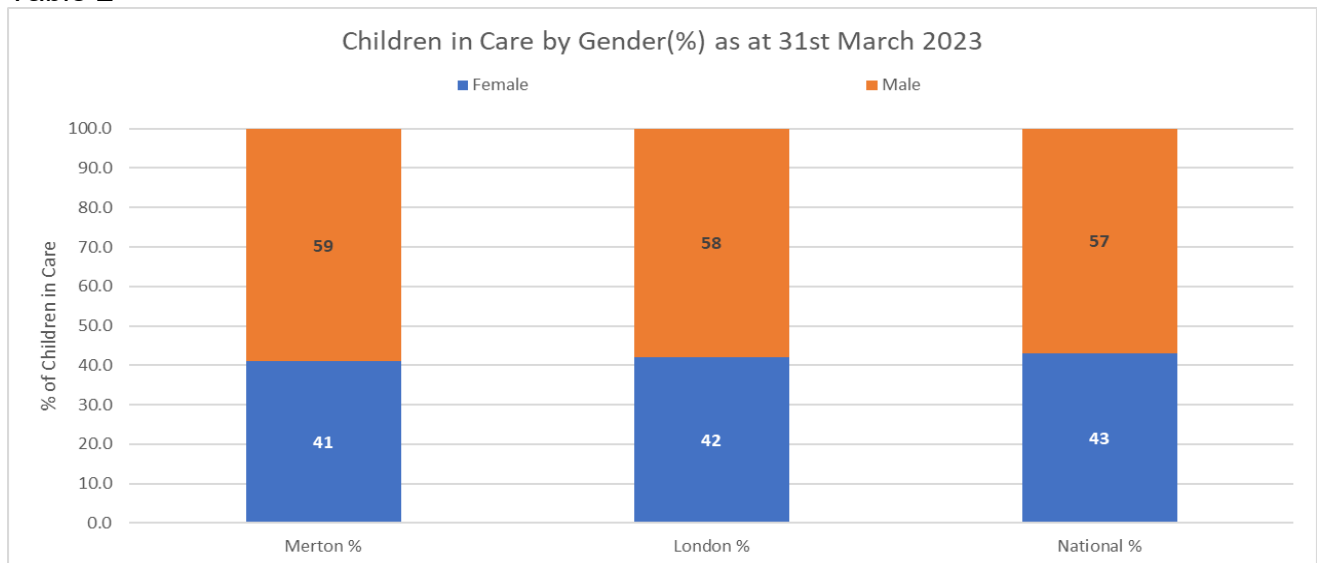
Section 1: Demographics

Table 1



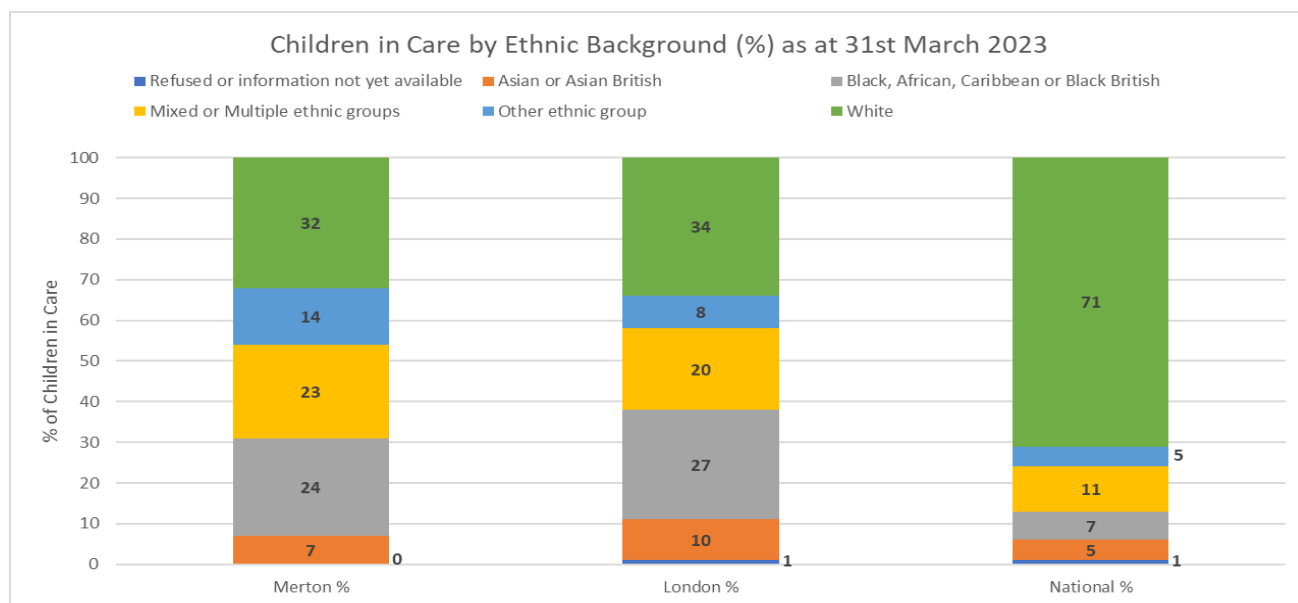
Merton is in line with the national trend of seeing more children enter care in late childhood. This is particularly stark in Merton in comparison with the London average; at 36%. Merton saw an increase from 36% in the previous reporting year to 44% in this reporting year. This snapshot shows that Merton has seen a reduction in the % of 10–15-year-olds from the previous year (46%), which now brings Merton in line with the national average for this age group at 38%. With Merton sitting below the national average with for all age group other than 16 years and over.

Table 2



Merton’s ratio between male and female is in line with the London and National picture. The higher level of males is attributable to a significantly higher number of 16- and 17-year-old males entering the care system.

Table 3



Black children and young adults are overrepresented in care. Conversely, children identifying from an Asian ethnicity are underrepresented. Both trends are reflected nationally. Whilst there is thought about the work local authorities can do with respect to identifying the causal connections to these demographics, the combination of factors in society including systemic disadvantage, systemic racism, and a lack of trust in statutory services in some cultures to report concerns and/or access services are likely to be underpinning factors. The over representation in 'other' ethnicities is due to our ongoing commitment to accept unaccompanied minors seeking refuge within the UK.

IV. Section 2: Care Processes

We strongly believe children have the right to, and should grow up with, their families. Our early help, child in need and child protection services strive to affect positive change within families and empower them to find their own sustainable solutions where children are safe and can thrive.

Pre-Proceedings

When we are very worried about the trajectory of children living with their families and our interventions have not been successful in supporting the family to make enough positive change, we will enter pre-proceedings as a last attempt to affect change and divert the need for court proceedings.

During the reporting year we entered pre-proceedings for 11 families (20 children). This was an increase from the previous year when we have issued proceedings for 7 families (11 children).

Care Proceedings

During the reporting year, we issued proceedings for 14 families, consisting of 20 children and concluded proceedings on 16 children. Positively, 6 of those children either remained or returned to the care of their parent and one was able to stay within their family network under

a Special Guardianship Order. Of the 8 children receiving a Care Order, we were granted a Placement Order for 1 child meaning that they can be placed for Adoption.

Table 4

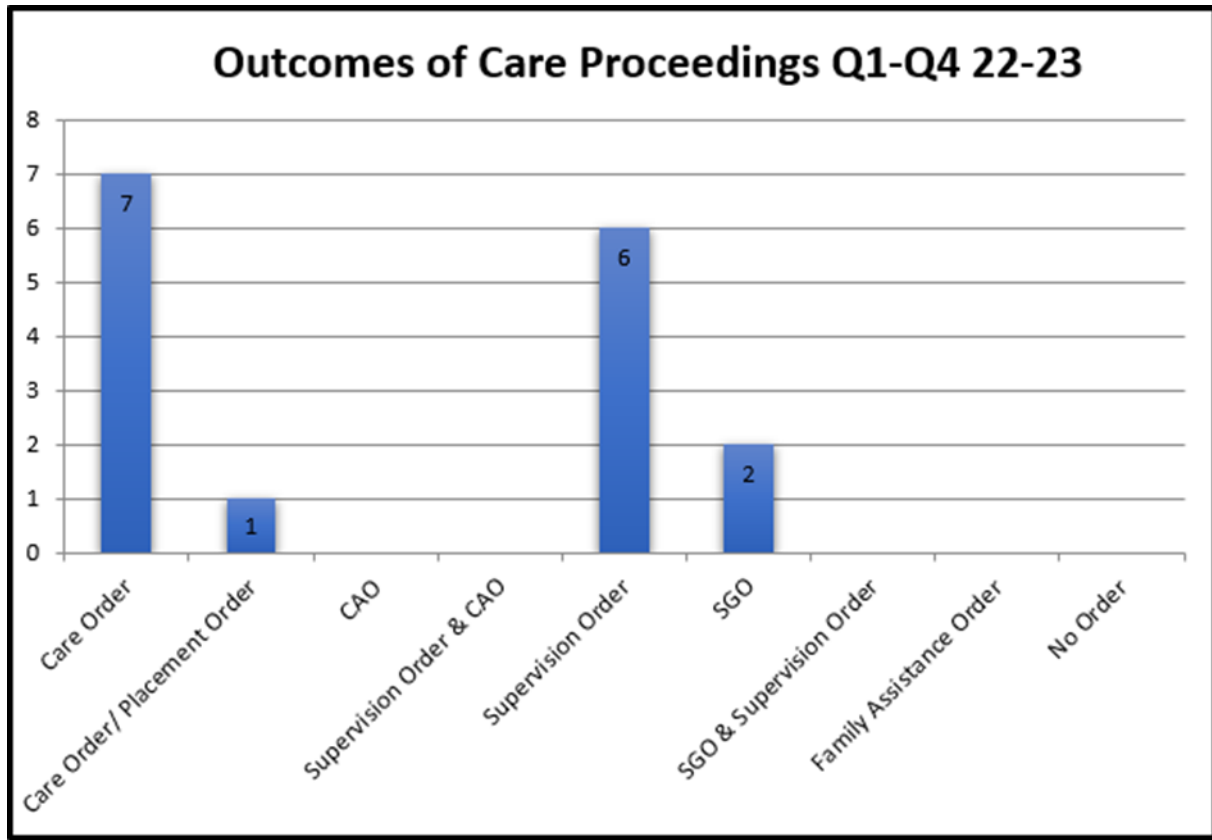
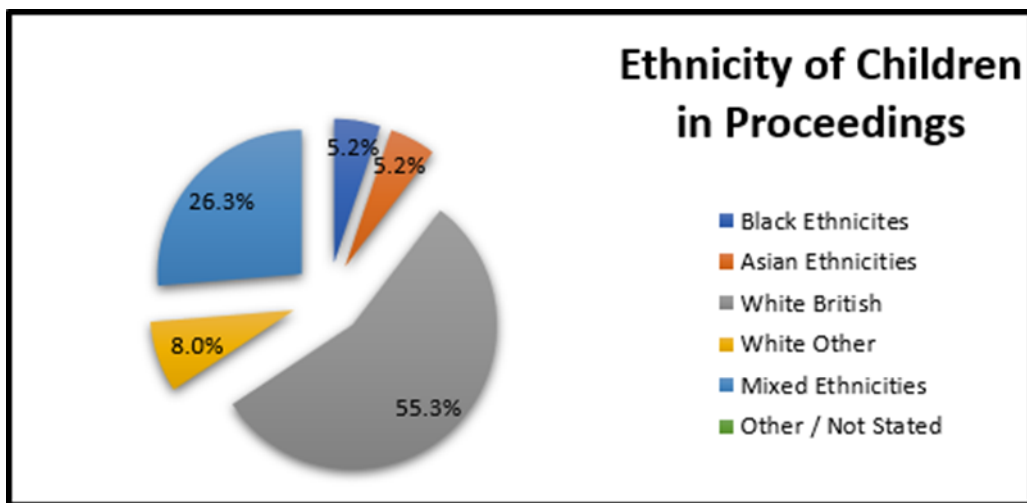


Table 5

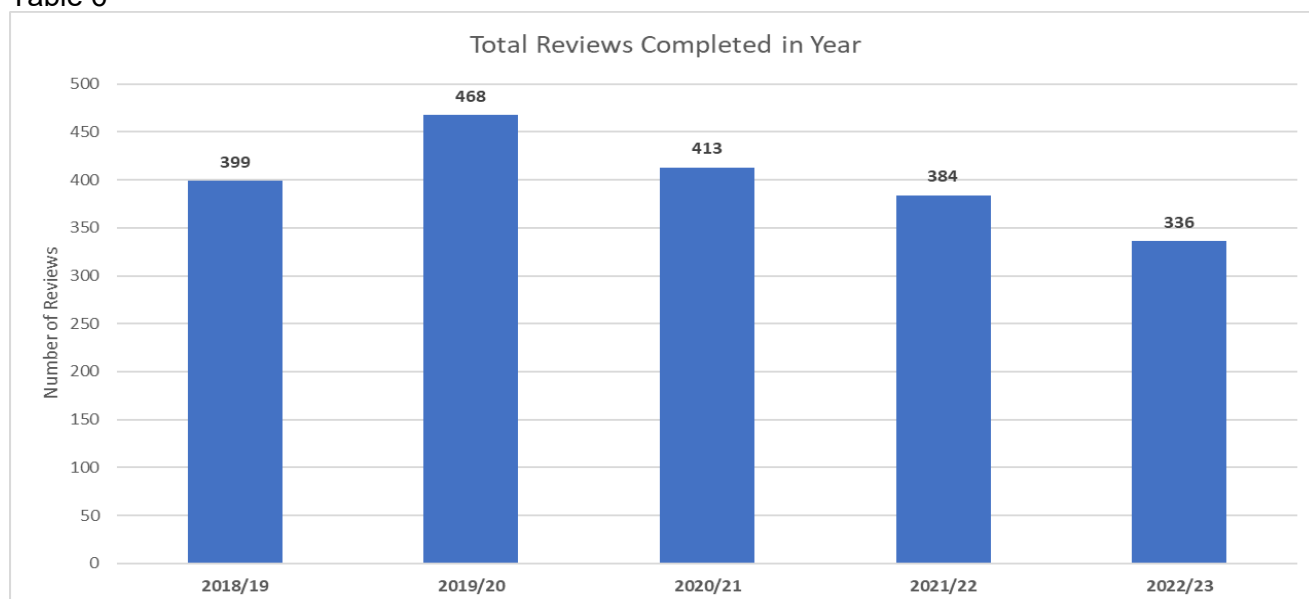


We continue to challenge our interventions and ensure that families of Black and Asian backgrounds do not experience disproportionate statutory interventions without adequate early interventions. Our data currently indicates that families of Black, Asian and Mixed

ethnicities are not overly represented in care proceedings for this period.

Children in Care Reviews

Table 6



The above graph shows the number of reviews were undertaken in the year. We continue to strive for a good prominent level of oversight from the Independent Reviewing Service and for reviews to be held within statutory timescales.

Table 7

Method of Participation at Review	2021/22		2022/23	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
PN0 – Child Aged under 4 at time of review	40	11%	44	13%
PN1 – Child physically attends and speaks for him/her self	216	57%	181	54%
PN2 – Child physically attends and an advocate speaks on his/her behalf	5	1%	8	2%
PN3 – Child attends and conveys his/her views symbolically (non-verbally)	1	0%	2	1%
PN4 – Child physically attends, but does not speak for him/her self, does not convey his/her views symbolically (non-verbally) and does not ask an advocate to speak for him/her	4	1%	6	2%
PN5 – Child does not attend physically, but briefs an advocate to speak for him/her	6	2%	4	1%
PN6 – Child does not attend, but conveys his/her feelings to the review by a facilitative medium	64	17%	65	19%
PN7 - child did not attend and views not conveyed	35	9%	26	8%
Not recorded	6	2%	0	0%

TOTAL	377	100%	336	100%
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The above table shows that 92% of our children were able to have their views shared and participate in their reviews, demonstrating a commitment to ensure children and young people are representation well during their reviews.

III. Section 3: Permanency and A Place to Call Home

'You will have somewhere safe to call home' and have a stable home, is a Merton Corporate Parenting pledge which is central to us achieving our ambitions for our children and young people. Whenever it is possible and safe enough, we will strive to keep children within their family networks. Only when this is not possible will we look at adoption and if this is not achievable or in the child's best interest, will we consider long term foster care.

Adoption

Following the central government mandate to regionalise adoption services, on 1 July 2019 most of Merton's adoption functions were transferred to Adopt London South (ALS), alongside eight other South London local authorities and regular practices have been established. The Permanency Lead who moved to the Corporate Parenting Service post the restructure is also the Adoption Link with Adopt London South and has regular meetings with the ALS designated link. The post holder continues to work closely and has a strong working relationship with the social work teams to support our children whose path for permanence is adoption.

During the year, 4 children were adopted. The average time between these children entering care and moving in with their adoptive families was 125 days and below the national average. This was lower than the previous year. The average over the last 3-year period was 312 Days. No children from a Black, Asian or minority ethnic community were adopted at the end of the reporting year. There were 3 children with placement orders waiting to be adopted.

We reported nationally on one additional child who was adopted within this reporting year via exceptional circumstances. This child's adoption was the result of being placed with their foster carer after the break down of their special guardians in 2014. After being permanently matched with their foster carer and being very happy and settled in her care, in 2020 the child and carer expressed a wish turn their fostering arrangement into an adoption. Because of the child's age and the support of all parties, the adoption order was made through private proceedings and there was no Placement Order or Agency Decision required. For this reason, the Adoption is not included in our measures on timeliness.

Children with Plans for Long Term Foster Care.

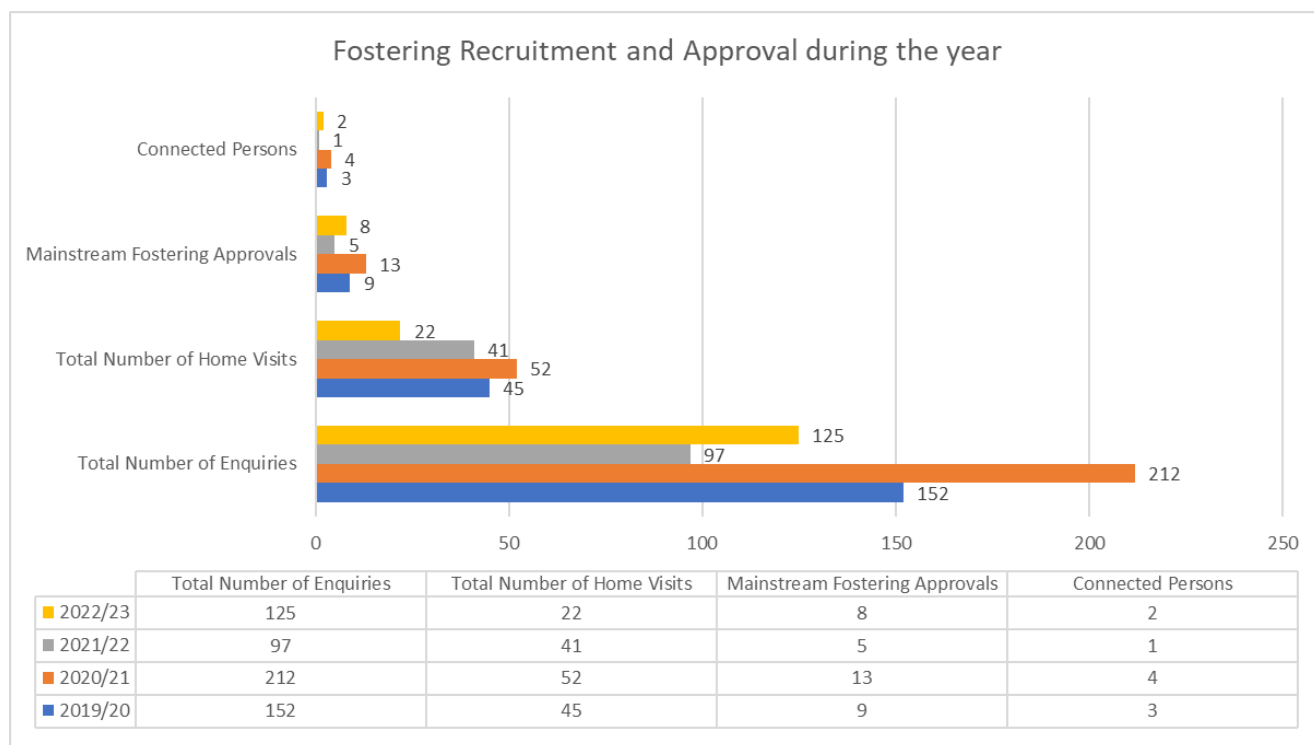
There has been a focus on permanence over the previous 2 years. A lot of work was undertaken to ensure meaningful permanence planning meetings were taking place for children and Life Story Work was being undertaken to ensure children had an understanding and positive narrative of their journey into, and through care. Training has continued to be provided through our internal training offer established by the Permanency Lead and a lead within the independent reviewing service to place a greater emphasis on Life Story as children journey in the care system. The training offer will continue to be developed through our vision of having expert by experience trainers, so that young people with care experience can support

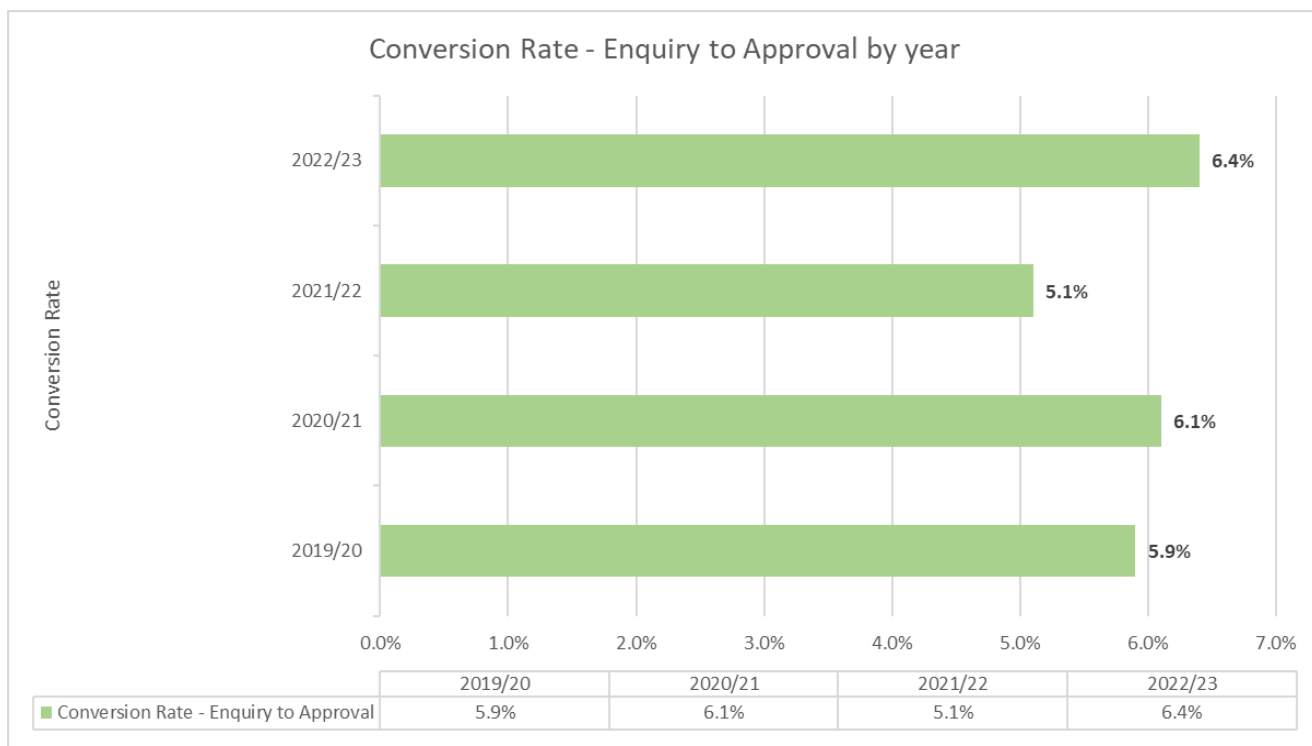
the workforce across the department to deliver exceptional life story work.

Following this focus on permanency, the service was delighted that our dedication to pursuing timely permanence for all children if they cannot live safely with their birth families was recognised as a strength by Ofsted. The network around a child holds a permanency planning meeting for all children who are not yet matched with their long-term carers which occurs every 6 weeks a part of practice. Qualitative audits show evidence of direct work and life story work being undertaken with children in care. The importance of meaningful direct work and the link between this and achieving permanence is well understood in the service and we will continue to improve on our practice.

Fostering Recruitment

Table 8





The 2022/23 saw an increase in the number of enquiries and approvals from the previous year. Merton has a dedicated, part time, fostering recruitment officer who links in with the Commissioning Alliance which has 35 Local Authorities as members and The London Permanence Partners. Both these groups look to share ideas and best practice around fostering recruitment and consider how we can work together to meet the challenges faced in placement sufficiency.

For the first part of the year we saw very low levels of enquiries from April to October 2022, and this was compounded by the reduction on marketing spend, however in October 2022 to the Fostering Recruitment Team received an increase in the marketing spend which saw an increase in the number of enquiries; between October 2022 to February 2023 which was there were 85 enquiries.

Merton Fostering Recruitment Team has worked hard to meet the challenging demands of various socio-political and economic events, such as the war in Ukraine and the Cost-of-Living Crisis through our innovative and cost-effective marketing strategy.

The national shortage of foster carers is well documented, and the service continue to think more creatively than ever around our sufficiency strategy. We continue to be a part of the Commissioning Alliance which allows us to share ideas and best practice and think creatively about how we address recruitment challenges.

Fostering Support

Children are cared for in a variety of settings; foster care, children’s homes, residential special schools, and a small number are in hospital settings. Some children in our care are placed in secure settings. On 31 March 2023, 85% of children were placed in foster care, 63% of those children were living with our in house foster carers.

At the end of March 2023, we had 64 approved foster households (59 mainstream and 5

connected carer households), which was a decrease on the previous year when we had 76 fostering households (59 mainstream and 5 connected carer households). Currently there are 19 care experienced young adults still living in their inhouse foster homes under 'staying put' arrangements, which was an increase on the previous year when we had 14 care experienced young adults.

Our Mockingbird Constellation, launched in September 2021 and continues to thrive with the first constellation launched in September 2021. The objective of the Mockingbird Programme is to provide a structure conducive to developing the capacity of foster carers both as a family unit (satellite home) and in the context of a community (constellation) to meet the identified needs of children, young people and families. The model's structure is designed to address specific systemic gaps found to be particularly damaging to children and young people in care including active safeguarding, placement stability, sibling contact and birth family involvement. To remain in Mockingbird Fidelity the constellation must have between 6 to 10 satellite homes and support 6 to 18 looked after children and young people. The number of foster carers in the Constellation fluctuated between 6 – 8 within the period April 2022 – March 2023. In April 2022 we had 6 fostering families in the Constellation, this increased to 8 fostering families in May 2022 and 12 children within the constellation.

The Hub Home carer organises monthly activities for the Constellation which the Liaison worker attends. Within this reporting period there have been 12 activities; one per month to which the children particularly enjoyed going; bowling, meals out and the trip to Tottenham Football Stadium. The Hub home carer also organises sleepovers. In September 2022 the Constellation celebrated the Moscars (Mockingbird Oscars) in which each of the children and young people were nominated to win awards and their successes were celebrated. We plan to continue this celebration event annually.

The strength in the Constellation during this time period was that the Hub Home Carers and Satellite Carers had built strong relationships, they were committed to being part of Mockingbird and felt supported. Due to the success, in 2024 we are planning to launch two more constellations.

Children and Young People Living in Other Settings

Whilst we believe children should grow up in a family setting, we also realise that all children are unique, and that we must have a wide range of options to meet their needs. For the small number of children whose needs we were unable to meet in a family home, our Access to Resource Team (ART) will find the best possible residential children's home to meet their individual needs. As of 31 March 2023, we had 1 child living in residential care home due to having a disability that requires a higher level of care than foster care can provide and 8 children living in a residential children's homes. The increase in the number of children placed in a residential setting is likely related to increase of the number of children coming into care and the complexities of these children requiring additional support outside of a foster care family.

For a small number of older children who have a proficient level of independent living skills and neither want nor need family-based care or a children's home, supported independent accommodation (SIA) can be considered. SIA usually takes the form of a bedroom in a home

with 2-3 other young people who share communal living spaces and have key work support. SIA provision is legal and is an important placement option for young people needing a stepping-stone to having their own tenancy. However, as this provision is not yet officially regulated by Ofsted the variability in quality between provision can be significant. To mitigate the risk of unregulated provision, we have embedded our own internal quality assurance process for SIA's accommodating our children. We also only use SIA accommodation that is 24-hour staffed. In Merton, we only ever have a small number of 16- and 17-year-olds living in SIA provision as part of their plan. At the end of this reporting year, we had 4 young people living in SIA provision, which was a decrease from 5 the previous year.

Nationally, because of the shortage of residential care and foster homes, local authorities are sometimes forced into using SIA provision to accommodate children who require *care* when no appropriate regulated accommodation can be found. Merton has found itself in this position increasingly over the reporting year, however still placing a tiny number of children in these provisions. As of 31st of March 2023, Merton has no children placed in SIA accommodation whose needs required a regulated children's home.

How Far Our Children Live from Merton

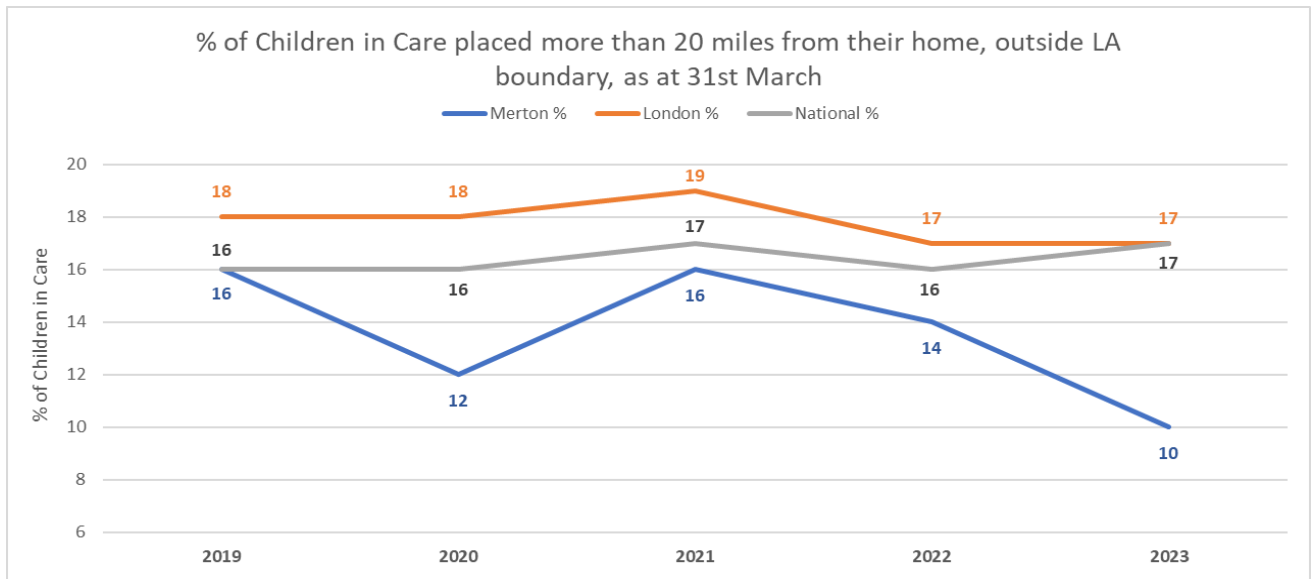
We always try to keep children living either in or as close to Merton as possible. There are many advantages to this, with the most important being to make ongoing meaningful contact between children and their birth families/networks easier to nurture. However, it is also advantageous to use Merton's own resources to meet the needs of our children including schools, health, housing, and mental health services. For this reason, our Sufficiency Strategy is always focused on creating more placement options and greater capacity within Merton.

Unfortunately, sometimes it is either not possible or not in the child's best interest to remain living in Merton. For some children, especially younger children who we are matching for long term foster care, we may prioritise the quality of a match between a child and foster parents over the geographical positioning. For some teenagers, we may not be able to protect them in a local community from adults wanting to exploit them and may decide that a period of living away will benefit the young person and help professionals to engage them in appropriate interventions to achieve the best outcomes for them outside of Merton. Unfortunately, for some children with very complex needs there are occasions where there is no local provision which can meet their needs.

We recognise the importance of having close relationships with neighbouring and other London boroughs to collectively tackle sufficiency and continue to be a part of collaborative commissioning programmes. Currently we are members of The South London Commissioning Programme and London Permanency Partners consortium.

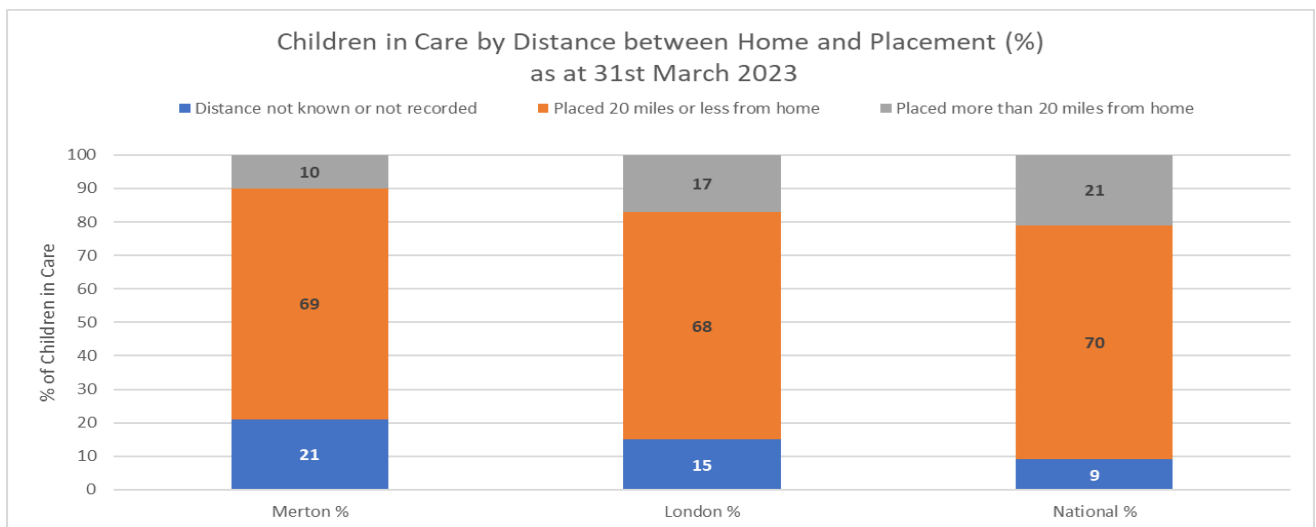
Placement Location

Table 9



However, Merton is not alone in these challenges. Positively this year Merton saw another decrease which is against the London data which saw an increase. We are ambitious about continuing this trend and are currently looking at actively developing more post-18 accommodation in borough for care experienced young people via a new project in refurbishment of Caretaker properties. The table below shows that we perform well in comparison to our London neighbours and nationally.

Table 10



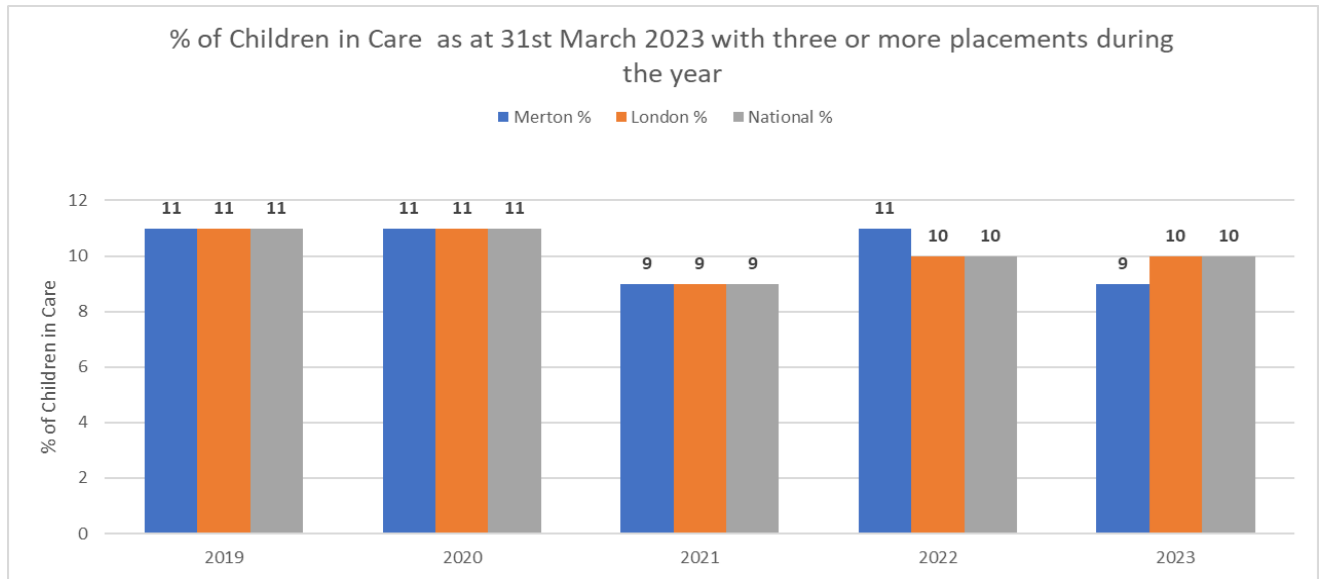
*'Distance not known or not recorded' includes unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Placement Stability

All our efforts to improve how effectively we achieve permanence for children is based on the principle that providing a child with a stable, loving home is key to them thriving and growing up to live happy, full lives. Our dedication to achieving stability for our children is what inspired us to invest and build upon the Mockingbird Model of Fostering as discussed in the fostering support section. With a projected plan for 2024 to launch two more constellations will help improve the stability of our foster placements and strengthen the relationships between carers,

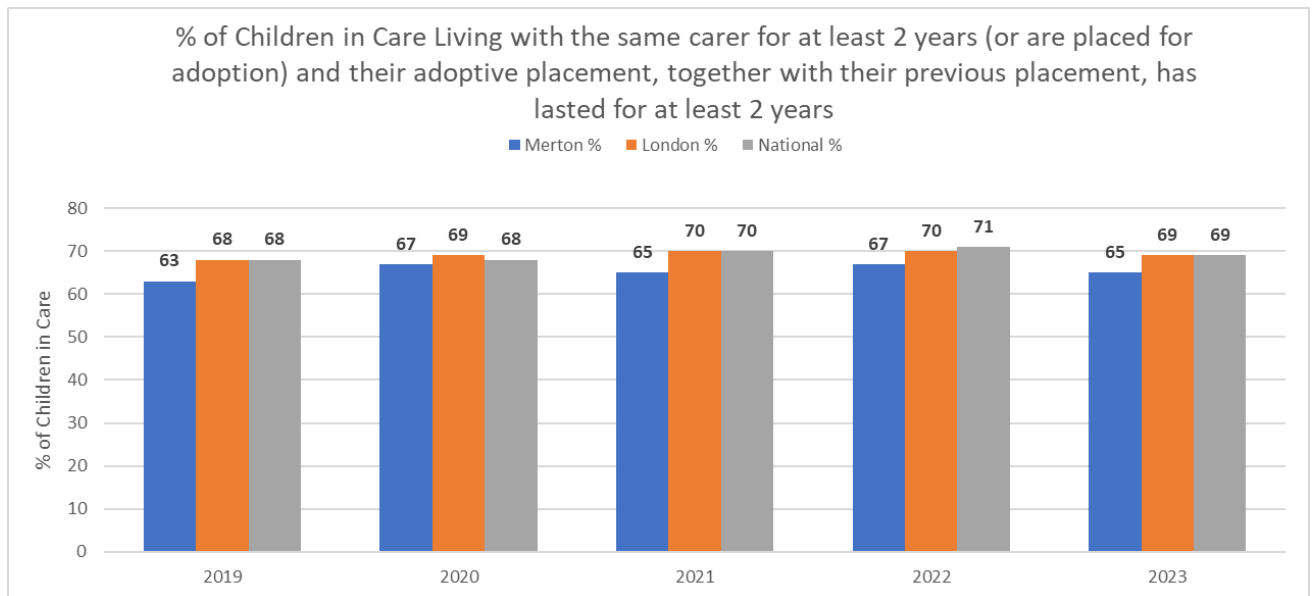
children and young people, fostering services and birth families.

Table 11



The above graph shows that we are in line with London and National figures of children who have experienced 3 or more placement moves within a year.

Table 12



*Includes children looked after continuously for at least 2.5 years at 31 March aged under 16 years

Permanence and stability through children having a sense of belonging, feeling they have a home and being loved is at the forefront of our ambitions. All children who haven't achieved permanence have regular permanency planning meetings which are tracked through fortnightly meetings chaired by a service manager. Fragile placements are monitored at the weekly Children in Care monitoring meeting chaired by the Head of Service to ensure robust operational work is being undertaken to ensure the best possible outcomes for children which align to best practice and Merton values.

IV. Section 4: Health

The data to inform the The Health Annual Report 2022/2023 won't be published until end of March 2024. The report will contain further details and in-depth data with respect of health outcomes for our children in care. This will be shared a subsequently the Corporate Parenting Board in June 2024.

We have some data to report on for the purposes of this annual report. Initial Health Assessments (IHA) are delivered through the Epsom and St Helier NHS Trust are performed by the Community Paediatric Team at St Helier and Epsom Hospital Trust. We know that during this reporting year children receiving their IHA in timescale were not at the expected level. This is an area that the partnership is striving to improve. Significant improvements were achieved in the timeliness of paperwork through the implementation of weekly monitoring meetings. Unfortunately, these improvements remained a challenged with the NHS experiencing significant staffing at Epsom and St Helier's, in addition to a new challenge with regards to parents refusing to sign consent. Partnership work is ongoing to ensure we see improvement in IHA's.

Review Health Assessments (RHA) are undertaken by the Looked After Children Nurse who works for the Central London Community Health Care Trust, but is co-located in Merton's Civic Centre with the social work teams. RHA's are considered within timescales if seen up to 6 weeks after the due date. A breach is where a child or young person hasn't received an appointment for a health assessment within the statutory timeframe. The Review Health Assessments (RHA's) are completed by the Looked after Children's Nursing Team for children over the age of 5 and some by the Community Paediatric Team for children under the age of 5. We know that all RHA during that reporting year remained 100% of children were seen in timescales (Excluding exceptions). This is above the national and London averages and is a testament to the commitment of our dedicated looked after care nurses. What is unique to Merton is that our Looked After Children Nurse will travel outside of the recommended radius to see our children to ensure wherever they are they are able to have a review health assessment and build a relationship with our Looked After Children Nurses.

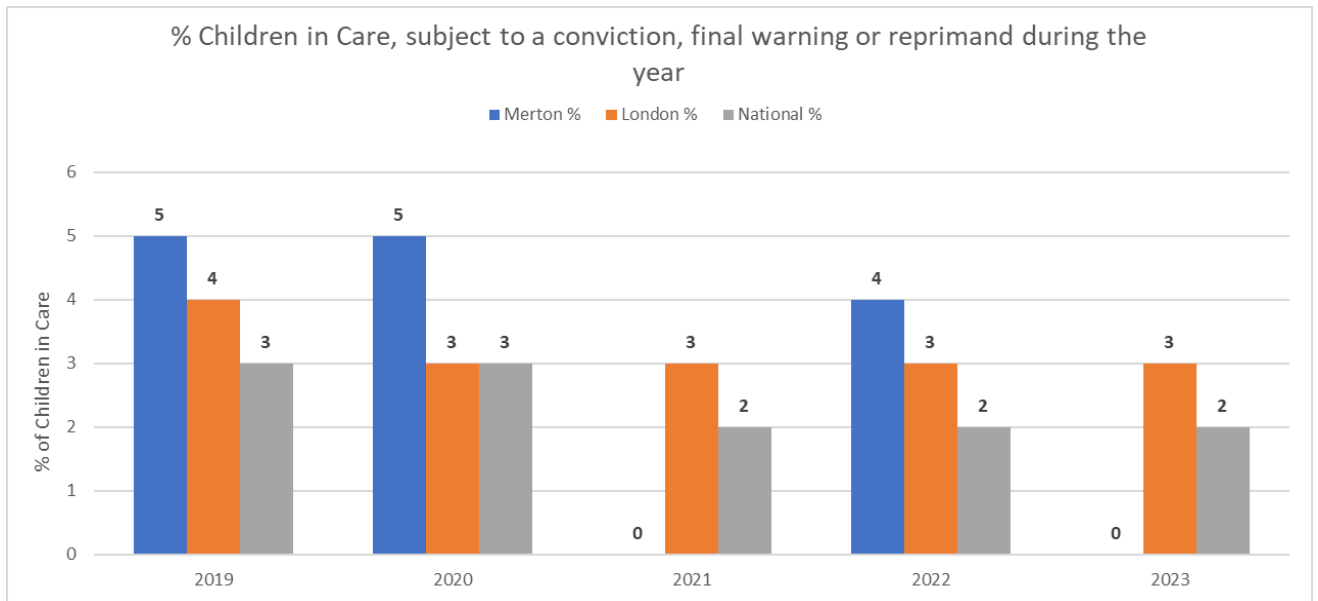
Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQ) are sent out to all children, carers and schools for children between the ages of 5-16 years old. SDQ are tools used to assess and monitor children's emotional well-being. Encouragingly we achieved 80% completion which was above the National average of 75%.

Section 5 Offending

Merton had 0 children subjected to a conviction, final warning or reprimand. Merton's very small numbers of children in care over the age of criminal responsibility (79), a single child receiving an order can have a significant impact on our statistics. In the last six years, Merton have continued to have no more than 4 children in care receive a substantive outcome through the criminal justice system.

Table 13

Source: Looked After Children return (903) reporting requirement.



Missing and Child Exploitation

In Merton, our numbers of children leaving placements without authorisation has dropped significantly than the previous year and the number of children going missing has dropped 1% to equal the London benchmark.

There has been a lot of work with families, carers, and placements to ensure that children and young people are being reported missing appropriately, and we think this improvement in practice is responsible for the statistical increase shown below. All missing children are monitored closely through Merton’s multi-agency Missing Panel which in turn feeds into the MACE Strategic Panel. The demographic of our young people who go missing remains as are males, and aged 14-18.

Table 14

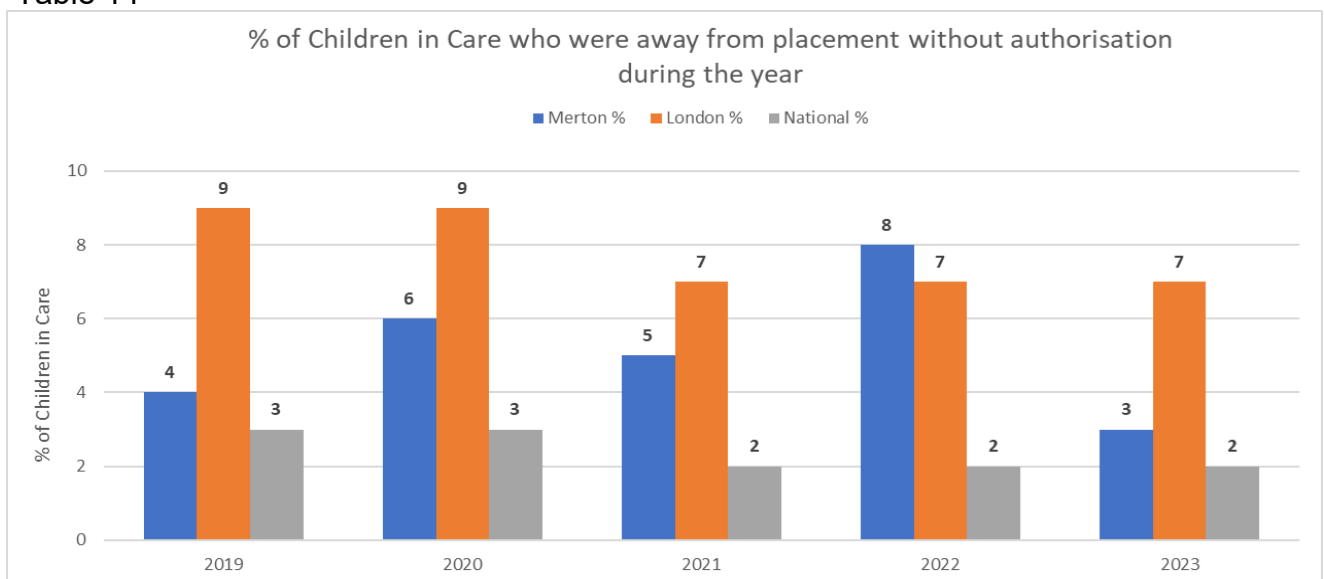
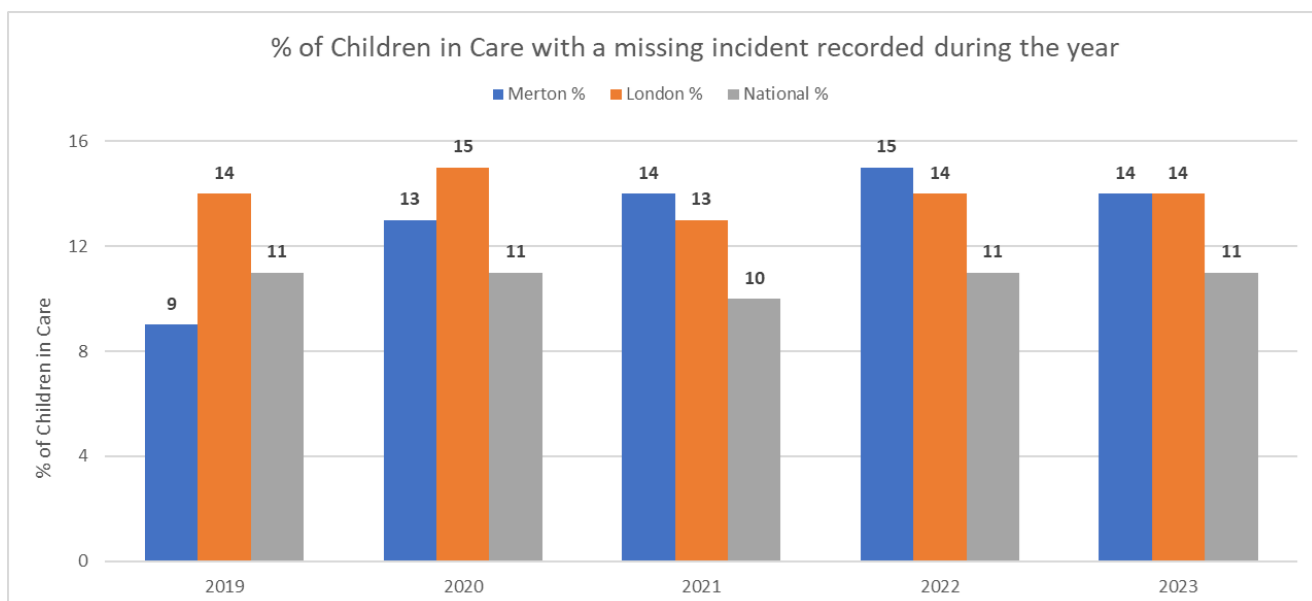


Table 15



The borough continues to develop and strengthen its awareness and understanding of the contextual harm risks within Merton. This is done by partnership working with the police, Catch 22, detached youth work and other community partnerships and agencies who remain committed to supporting children, young people and communities impacted by contextual harm.

V. Section 6: Education

“The work of the virtual school team is excellent. Strong strategic leadership and management oversight by the virtual school headteacher mean that outcomes for children looked after are consistently good. We continue to strive to have innovative approaches that enable children to reach their full potential start from a very young age and continue throughout their school time and beyond. Virtual schoolteachers know children well, tracking their progress and swiftly intervening when necessary. As a result, outcomes for most children improve when they enter care. Attendance at school or college for children in care is high. Support for children placed outside the local authority area is as strong as it is for those within the borough. Staff work very closely with designated teachers and school leaders. Pupil premium funding supports individual tuition where children are not making expected progress. Personal education plans are highly effective, and targets are precise and helpful for children (Ofsted Children Social Care Inspection Report 2022)”

Merton has a dedicated virtual school who continue to work closely with colleagues in social care, providing training, support and guidance to social workers, foster carers and others, covering key issues such as: school attendance; school admissions and consideration of placement moves. Close working relationships between social care and the Virtual School ensure that Education is given priority and impacts positively on outcomes for individual children and young people. The Virtual School Advisory Teachers attend all PEPs (Personal Education Plans) to ensure that support being provided to our children is of the highest level with the completion rate of PEPs being 100%.

Some key themes across the year included:

- Children consistently making academic progress against their own targets each term.
- Merton continued to have undergraduate students during the year some of whom successful achieve bachelor of honours degree.
- No child in care was permanently excluded during 2021-2022, continuing the trend of previous years.
- At the end of the academic year 27% of Children in Care to Merton had some form of special educational need. This is in line with the National DfE Published data of 2020/2021.
- 100% of Initial and Review PEPs were all completed within timescales each term throughout the academic year.
- All school age PEPs were quality assured against robust criteria, which are rigorously applied consistently. The Virtual School continues to support those young people who are entitled to a service from the local authority, of 18 – 25 years with education and training until the age of 25.

Additionally, the Virtual School supports young people 18 – 25 years who have more challenges in becoming EET, through the work of the EET Support Worker. The Virtual School ensures that every unaccompanied asylum-seeking child registered in care to Merton receives a swift and efficient service to place in education, according to the individual's needs

The data to inform the The Virtual School Headteacher's Annual Report 2022/2023 won't be published until end of March 2024. The report will contain further details and in-depth data with respect of educational outcomes for our children in care. This will be shared at the Virtual School Steering Group and subsequently the Corporate Parenting Board in June 2024.

VI. Section 7: Care Experienced Young People aged 19-21 years

Children's Social Care has a range of duties and powers to provide advice and assistance to eligible care experienced young people. Good corporate parents will provide young people with help and support to access education, employment and training opportunities and to find accommodation suitable to meet their needs and in Merton we aspire to be the best Corporate Parents we can be.

Care Experienced Young People in Touch

The below graphs show Merton's performance around keeping 'in touch' with our care experienced young people. Keeping in touch is a statutory duty which ensures that local authorities are making proactive attempts to engage care leavers and ensure that they are living in suitable accommodation and progressing in education, training or employment. The graphs show continued improvement in the 17-18 cohort which saw it raise from 92% in 2022 to 97% in 2023.

Table 16

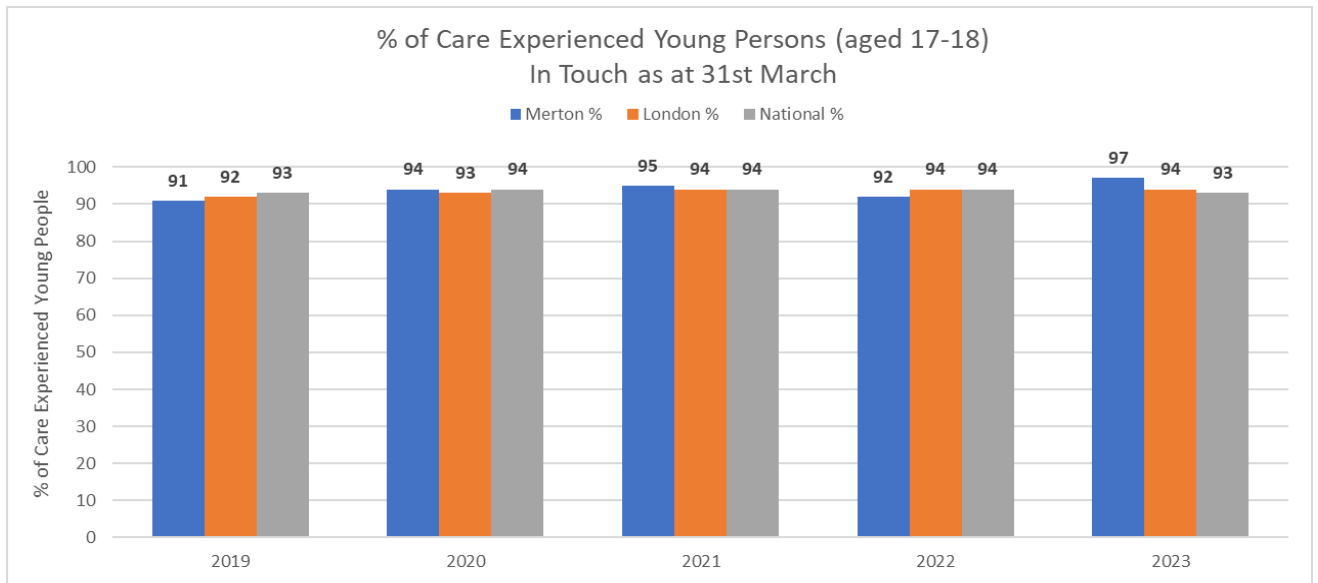
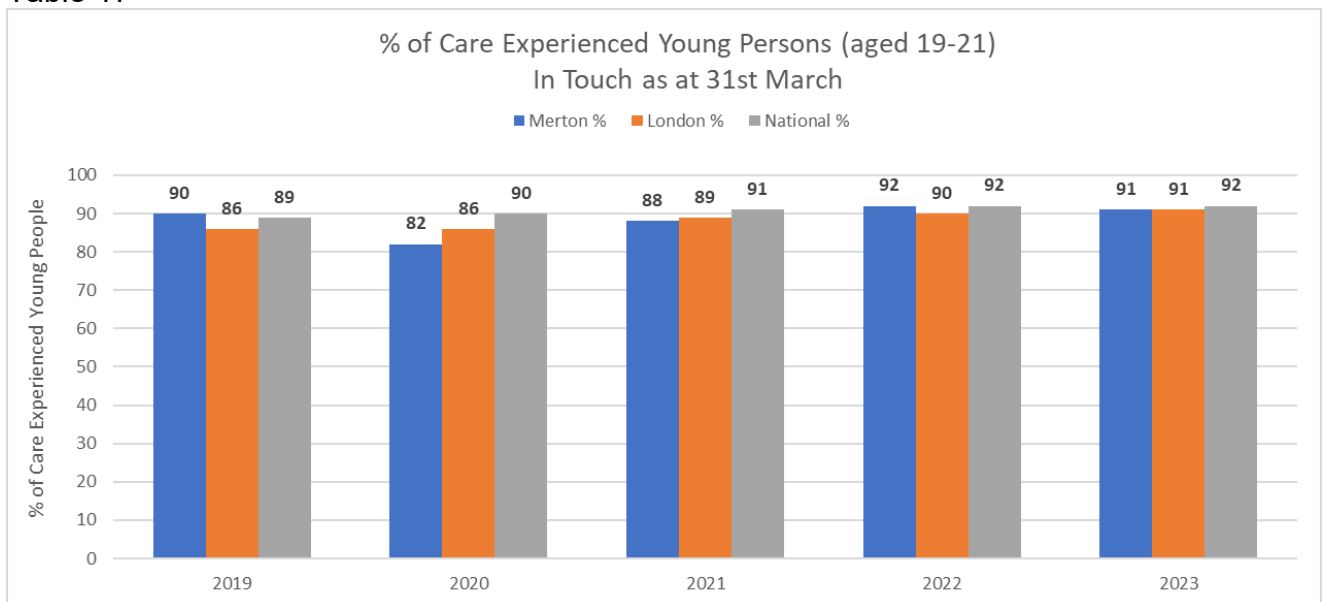


Table 17



Care Experienced Young People’s Accommodation

The legal framework for care experienced young people aims to make sure that they receive the right support and services in their transition to adulthood, including access to accommodation. The legislation most relevant to care leavers' accommodation needs is the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, which imposes accommodation duties on local authorities to support certain categories of looked-after children and care leavers.

The charts below compare Merton with our neighbours and nationally around the numbers of care experienced young people in suitable accommodation over a 5-year period.

Table 18

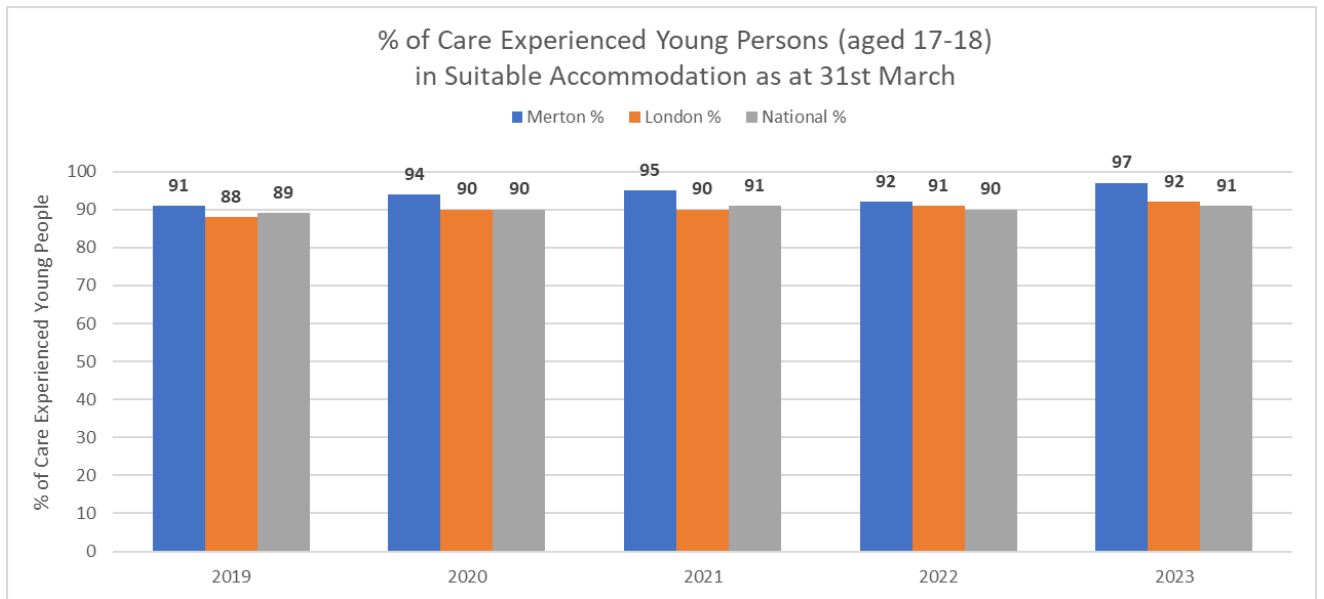
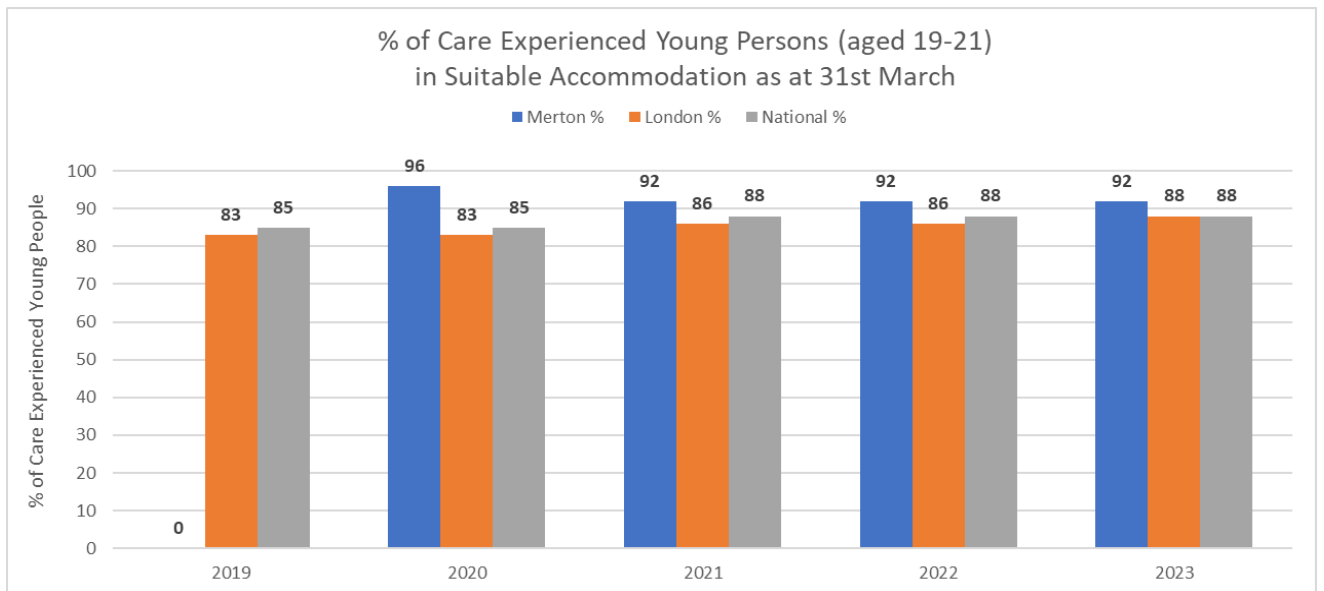
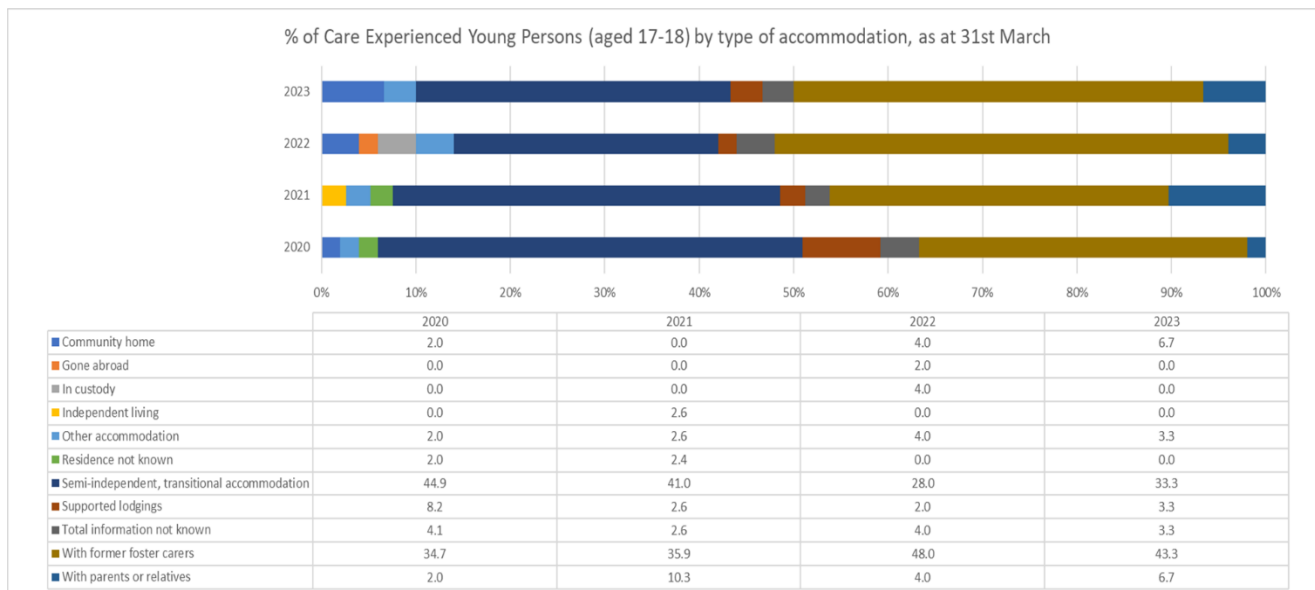


Table 19



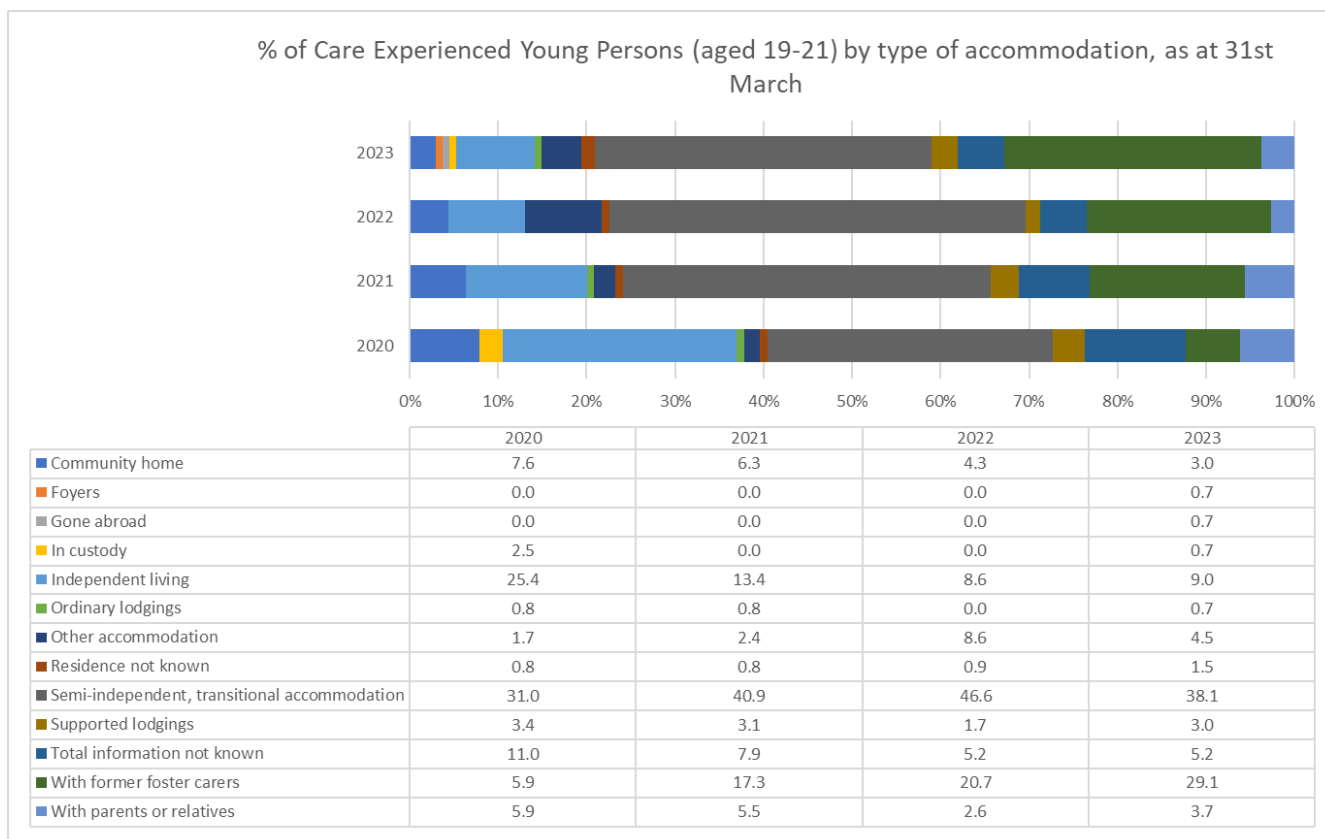
The graphs show that Merton continues to perform well comparatively with other local authorities.

Table 20



The above shows the types of accommodation our 18-year-olds are living in. It is very positive to see the high proportion of care experienced young people *staying put* with their former foster carers, which is in line with our belief that the best place to prepare for adulthood is within a loving family environment.

Table 21



The above graphs shows a continued decline in the number of young people moving onto independent accommodation. This is partly due to the pandemic and ongoing housing pressures causing the average age when young people receive their tenancies to rise. The

increasing numbers of 19 and 21-year olds remaining with their former foster carers shows the commitment the fostering community has to our children while the pressures remain in the housing sector.

Care Leavers in Education, Employment or Training (EET)

A good standard of education is a key driver towards achieving positive employment outcomes in adulthood. Positively, we have continued to improve supporting our care leavers into education, training and employment. We have dropped slightly from 82% to 80% with 17 – 18 year-olds, and have risen from 65% to 67% with 19 – 21 year-olds, being in some form of Education, Employment and Training (EET).

Table 22

Care Experienced Young Persons Activity as at 31st March (Aged 17-18)	2018/19		2019/20		2020/21		2021/22		2022/23	
	Merton	National	Merton	National	Merton	National	Merton	National	Merton	National
Total in Education, Employment or Training	79%	64%	67%	64%	69%	65%	82%	66%	80%	66%
Total information not known	3%	6%	6%	6%	3%	5%	4%	6%	6%	6%
Total not in Education, Employment or Training	18%	30%	27%	31%	28%	30%	14%	28%	16%	28%

Care Experienced Young Persons Activity as at 31st March (Aged 17-18)	2017/18		2018/19		2019/20		2020/21		2021/22	
	Merton	National	Merton	National	Merton	National	Merton	National	Merton	National
Total in Education, Employment or Training	59%	64%	79%	64%	67%	64%	69%	65%	82%	66%
Total information not known	10%	6%	3%	6%	6%	6%	3%	5%	4%	6%
Total not in Education, Employment or Training	31%	30%	18%	30%	27%	31%	28%	30%	14%	28%

Care Experienced Young Persons Activity as at 31st March (Aged 19-21)	2018/19		2019/20		2020/21		2021/22		2022/23	
	Merton	National	Merton	National	Merton	National	Merton	National	Merton	National
Total in Education, Employment or Training	66%	52%	50%	53%	58%	52%	65%	55%	67%	56%
Total information not known	5%	9%	11%	9%	6%	7%	6%	7%	6%	6%
Total not in Education, Employment or Training	29%	39%	39%	39%	35%	41%	29%	38%	28%	38%

The below graphs show that Merton is doing well in comparison to London and National averages.

Table 23

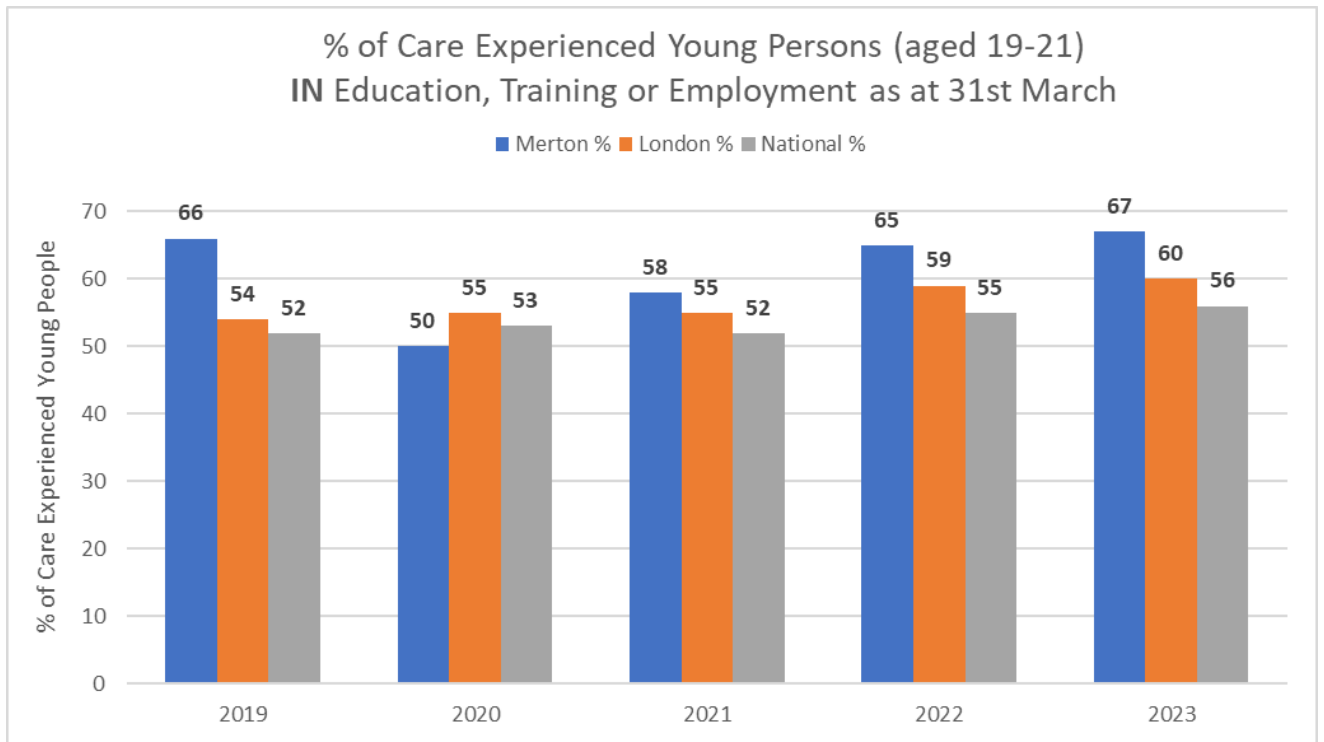
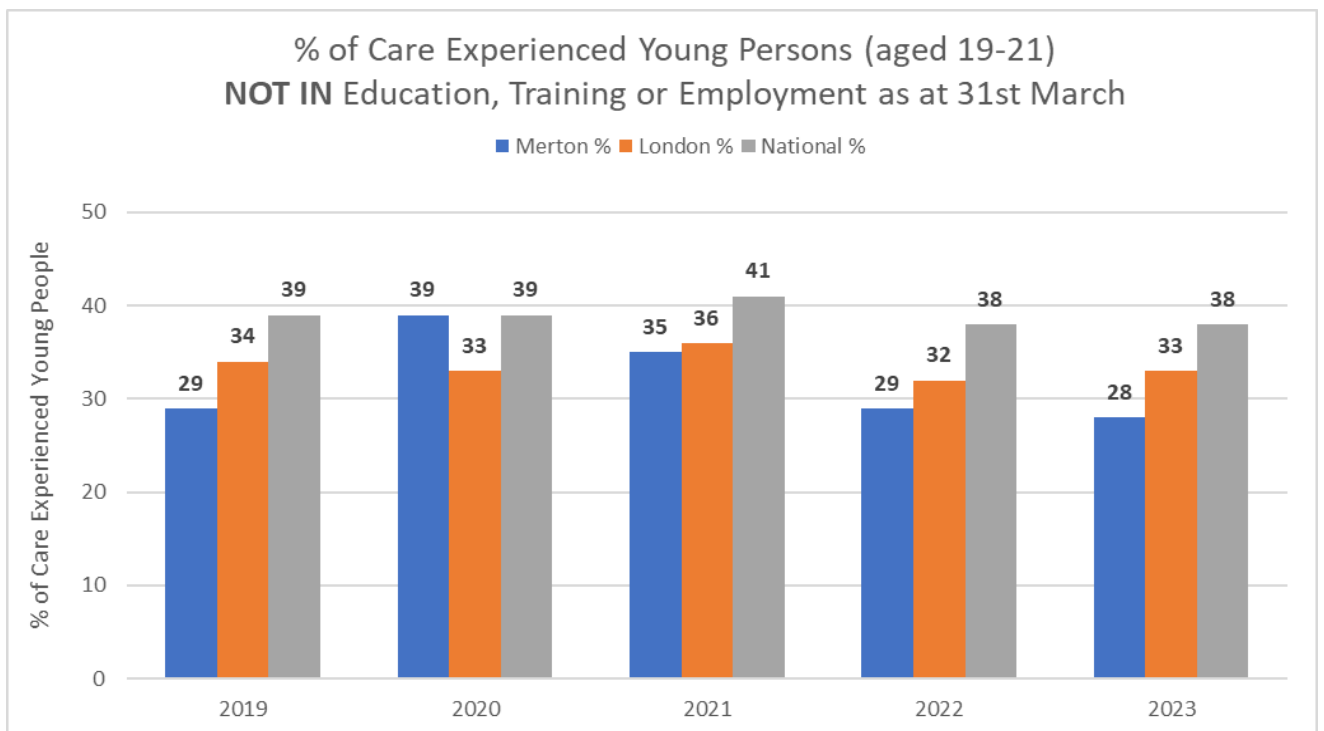


Table 24



Whilst the performance continues to remain above the London and national with care experienced young people being in education, we know that EET is an area which we must continue to strive for excellence in and have high ambitions for our young people. We continue to have monthly NEET (Not in Employment, Education and Training) panels to track and discuss our young people not in EET and what further actions we can take to support them into positive activity. We aim to build upon this panel in 2024 to have our young people attend and participate in talking about their goal and aspirations and how they can best be supported

to achieve this. The panel is chaired by one of our 16+ Team Managers and also has colleagues from the My Futures Team and the dedicated advisory teacher from our Virtual School who supports the young people finding it the most challenging to transition into or remain in EET.

Participation and Our Voice

Merton's participation service sits within the education department where it is included in the overall youth participation of the council. Merton has several Young Inspectors two of which have been ring fenced for care experienced young people. Merton Council has a strong commitment to youth voice, and this includes hearing from our care-experienced children and young people. In Merton, the Participation and Engagement team facilitate the Children in Care Council and Care Leaver Forum, both called Our Voice.

Through Our Voice, young people can have their say, make new friends, and experience new opportunities such as social trips into Central London. Additionally, the Our Voice logo was designed by one of our care-experienced young people.



The forums allow children and young people the opportunity to have a say on the issues that are most important to them and provides professionals working with care-experienced children and young people an opportunity to consult and gain feedback. During this period, children and young people were able to have their say on a range of themes, such as:

- Creating their own campaigns around housing and moving placements
- The Government's consultation titled 'Stable Homes, Built on Love'
- Merton's Safeguarding Children's Partnership's scrutiny on adultification
- Review and feedback on the implementation on a new youth voice app
- Contribution to the Young Londoners Research Programme

The Participation team also provides opportunities for members of Our Voice to contribute to the recruitment process of new starters by sitting on interview panels and setting their own interview questions.

To ensure good engagement, the Participation team attended several team meetings and linked in with the Merton Foster Carer Association (MFCA) to update and inform those supporting children and young people about the opportunities available. Positively, the Care Leaver Forum meet once a fortnight. To boost children's participation in the Children in Care

Council, the team are in the process of creating a 12-month engagement plan, which will be co-produced with young people, and include opportunities such as training, workshops, and flexible meeting dates & times which will accommodate those who have pre-existing commitments and cannot attend the regular planned sessions. Information about Our Voice is shared directly with fostering families, Social Workers, Personal Advisors and young people already engaged with the service. The Participation team have also shared information about opportunities through their Instagram page.

Previous engagement sessions have taken place across the community, using venues such as libraries, however both forums have moved into a 'Hub' in Mitcham. The venue has been partly-decorated by young people, and they have had the opportunity to create artwork to make the space feel more welcoming. The Hub also features a new food pantry for care leavers, which is being funded through Merton Council's Children's Social Care department and the Integrated Care Board (ICB).

In addition to facilitating the forums, the Participation team have introduced two new platforms to shape the delivery of services for care-experienced children and young people. Firstly, they have begun compiling a newsletter solely for care-experienced children and young people. Young people have the opportunity to in-put to the newsletter, which is published every three months and features competitions, staff biographies and information on activities and events. Secondly, they have established an entertainments committee with the view to involve professionals, fostering families and young people when planning positive activities and events. This should also support with engagement and ensure our forums and activities are representative of Merton's wider community.

Merton are proud to share that young people's interview panels continued support recruitment to various roles in within Children, Lifelong Learning and Families (CLLF)

Our Young Inspectors were successful in a bid to facilitate peer research as part of the Young Londoners Research Programme, funded by the Mayor of London in facilitating peer research projects focused on ***“What reforms need to be made to youth services to make them more engaging and accessible for care-experienced young people, aged 11-16, in the London Boroughs of Merton, Wandsworth and Kingston?”*** and presented their key findings and recommendations at the “Voices of the Future” event in June 2023. More information with respect of the key findings of the Young Londoners Research Programme can be found in the Bright Futures: A Spotlight on Youth Services for Children in Care documents, with the full report Voices of the Future report available via the Young Londoners Research Programme website.

Voice of the Child in Care

A update on the Bright Spots Survey was completed in March 2022; with the findings presented in July 2022. The focus of the survey was *Your Life Beyond Care* and the *Children in Care*. The corporate parenting have been successful in being a part of the Staying Connected pilot delivered by Coram Voice, Funded from Hadley Trust to pilot work alongside 3 other local authorised to deliver a series of workshops with Merton leadership team, workforce, carers and young people to explore national and local Bright Spots findings to

create an action plan to development and address the key issues shared within the Bright Spots Survey. The findings of the survey had continued to inform our current planning and strategies with a focus around family time and will be used to shape the Corporate Parenting Strategy.

There are many ways that the child’s voice is incorporated into their own planning including: direct work tools, their IRO consulting them prior to reviews and midway reviews, feedback on their foster homes as part of foster carer reviews, and through advocacy and independent visitors which is covered in the below section.

Advocacy and Independent Visiting

Jigsaw4u have been providing advocacy and independent visiting since 2013 as a commissioned service. The current contract runs until 2025. Jigsaw4u received 246 referrals for advocacy for children in their reviews in 2022/23.

The breakdown of the referrals included;

Referral by Case Type		
CIC	34	13%
CLA	35	13%
ICPC	159	61%
RCPC	28	10%
Complaint	2	1%
Other	6	2%
	264	100%

This was a significant increase from last year’s 60 referrals. Once a referral is made, an advocate will meet with the child and attend their review until either the young person or social worker informs them that advocacy is no longer required. This has been the Service’s busiest year by far, and (with the exception of the Covid-19 year), and the rise in referrals shows Merton's growing commitment to ensure children’s voices are heard and listened too.

This year, Jigsaw4u advocated 34 times for 18 individual UASC. These sessions generally take place via 3-way video call between the young person, advocate and an interpreter. In addition to receiving advocacy, some of these young people joined Jigsaw4u on a day trip to Brighton and have been taken to a box at Crystal Palace FC to watch live matches. An Advocate for one of the young people also got him a trial at local football club.

As of 31 March 2023, Jigsaw4u were providing 9 young people with Independent Visitors. This is in line with last year when we had 9 young people matched. The commissioned target is 8 matches.

The service supported/advocated on behalf of individuals and families (across the borough not just children in care/care experienced) in making a complaint. This was below the target of 12 with only 2 Complaints recorded for this reporting year. In Merton we see our complaints service as another way of ensuring that children and young people are being heard and to ensure that we are providing them with a good service and support young people and families around were issues they face

VII. Conclusion

This reporting year remains encouraging that Merton remains focused on achieving good outcomes for our children in care, care experienced young adults and improving services and practice to support these good outcomes. The workforce continued to remain aspirational and focused in maintaining 'Outstanding' practice to maintain the awarded Ofsted judgment given during the February inspection 2022. We finished the year achieving an excellent response rate to our Coram Voice commissioned 'Bright Spots' survey and building collaboratively building an action plan to continue developing our services for our children and young people. With an organisational culture that prioritises listening, care and compassion to our services users and making continuous improvement, we will continue to adapt and seek the very best outcomes for our care experienced children and young people.

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