

# Looked After Children Strategy 2019-2021



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# 1 Foreword

In Merton, we are passionate about making sure our Looked After Children and Young People lead safe, healthy and happy lives where they can achieve their full potential. As corporate parents, we work hard to ensure that this passion drives a firm commitment from everyone who works with our Looked After Children and Young People, so that they are afforded the same care, security and stability as any parent would want for their child.

At the very heart of this strategy are the views of our children and young people who shared their experience of being looked after with us. This strategy addresses the things that those children said would make a real difference to the quality of their lives, such as improving the stability of their placements and supporting them to develop good relationships with people who are important to them.

It is also critical that we support Looked After Children into independence as Care Leavers. This year, we have improved the support and opportunities for young people entering employment or seeking apprenticeships, whilst also seeing eleven young people in our care head off to university. Over the next three years, we will work closely with the Children in Care Council and our Care Leavers to ensure that we continue to provide support such as life skills coaching and developing appropriate housing options.

This report also recognises the contribution of Merton's Children's Services and our partners, who have identified specific areas of practice where improvements could prevent children from becoming looked after, and increase positive outcomes for both Looked After Children and Young People, regardless of whether they are currently in care or they have left care to return home to live with friends and family, be adopted or they have reached adulthood and independence.

We will continue to review our pledges to Looked After Children and Young People, taking into consideration any changes that may occur locally or nationally, so that the service we offer meets our statutory duties whilst being innovative and aspirational.

We are ambitious for, and proud of, our Looked After Children and Young People. By working together, we are confident that our Looked After Children and young people will have bright futures.



*Kelly Braund*

Councillor Kelly Braund, Cabinet Members for Children's Services

## 2 Introduction

This Looked After Children Strategy 2019 – 2021 has been developed to ensure that the Corporate Parenting Principles are embedded in our practice in relation to Looked After Children. This strategy focusses on achieving the best outcomes for Looked After Children and young people and outlines what we expect of ourselves as corporate parents and what our Looked After Children can expect from us.

The core intention of this strategy is to ensure that Looked After Children and young people have the best possible care and support to live as normal a life as they are able within the framework of statutory services and intervention.

We strongly believe that all children should have a positive experience of family life, feel safe, experience security and have a relationship with a trusted adult they can turn to when they need support.

Our role as corporate parents is significant and far reaching and we will exercise this with commitment and accountability across all areas of the council and partnership. We will consistently strive to ensure all our young people reach their potential, develop into independent, self-confident adults and enjoy their place in society.

Merton's services for Looked After Children also form part of a comprehensive continuum of support for children and young people who may be facing difficulties at home. These range from family support to intensive community interventions or seeking permanent alternative care. In taking this approach we will remain committed to ensuring that children only enter care when it is necessary for their wellbeing, enabling us to ensure that their experiences in care are positive. When children do need to come into care, we seek to ensure that care proceedings are timely and our care plans appropriately safeguard children and support decisions around permanence in the best interests of each child.

We will ensure that high expectations for our Looked After Children are shared widely and genuinely. By involving our partners, we will ensure coordinated wrap-around services are provided so that our children feel safe at home and in the community and develop or maintain trusted relationships, achieve at nursery, school, and college and beyond, are involved in out of school sporting, artistic or cultural activities and importantly have a positive experience of family life.

The views and opinions of our Looked After Children are central to every stage of the planning we do with them as their corporate parents. We will ensure that we listen to what they say, review our practice, make effective decisions on their behalf and feed back to them in order that they feel valued and listened to.



### 3 Our Strategic Vision

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

- Demonstrating that the views and ambitions of children and young people have informed and improved our service offer.
- Providing or commissioning services or settings which are independently judged good or outstanding.
- Improving outcomes and closing gaps, particularly for vulnerable children and young people.
- Evidencing that our early help work has prevented the development of higher needs, or enabled stepping down from intervention and developing resilience and independence.

### 4 The National and Local Context

Under the Children Act 1989, a child is legally defined as 'looked after' by a local authority if he or she:

- is provided with accommodation for a continuous period for more than 24 hours;
- is subject to a care order; or
- is subject to a placement order.

A Looked After Child ceases to be looked after when he or she turns 18 years old. On reaching his or her 18th birthday, the status of the child changes from being Looked After to being a young adult eligible for help and assistance from the local authority as a Care Leaver. Children and young people achieve their best outcomes when provided with security, stability and love throughout their childhood and beyond. The majority of Looked After Children return home to their families after a short period of time in the care of the local authority. The underpinning principle of the Children Act 1989 places a legal duty on local authorities to support families to stay together when this is a safe and realistic option.

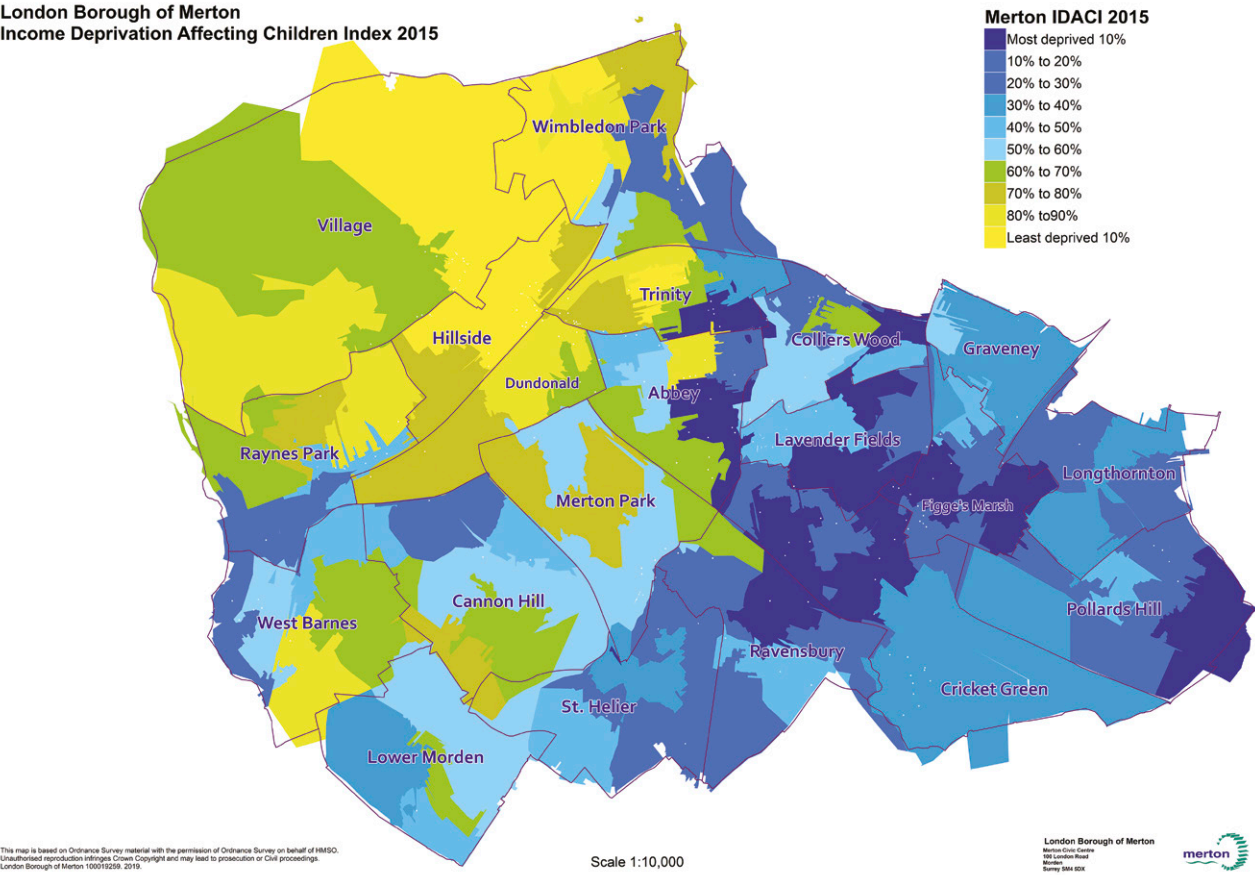
#### The National Context

Over the past twenty years, there has been a consistent increase in the number of Looked After Children nationally. In part this rise, in more recent years, is due to an increased number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) both nationally and locally. During 2016/17 there was a slight drop in numbers of Looked After Children nationally if these young people are excluded from the figures (this being the most recent year for which comparative national data is currently available).

Merton's Looked After Children population differs from the national picture with an over representation of those aged 16+ and a lower number of 5-9 year olds in care than is typical. Nationally 63% of Looked After Children are aged 16+, however in Merton this is currently 77%, with the 5-9 ages representing 19% of Looked After Children nationally but only 10% in Merton. There is a slight over representation of males in Merton compared to the national figure (59% compared to 56%).

## Merton as a Borough

Predominantly suburban in character, Merton is divided into 20 wards and has three main town centres: Wimbledon; Mitcham; and Morden. A characteristic of the borough is the difference between the more deprived east (Mitcham / Morden) and the more affluent west (Wimbledon). There are a number of pockets of deprivation within the borough mainly in the eastern wards and some smaller pockets in the central wards. These wards have high scores on income deprivation, unemployment and limited educational attainment. Merton has 39 Super Output Areas which are amongst the 30% most deprived areas across England for children. (Super Output Areas are used by the Office for National Statistics for many of its statistical outputs). This means 45% of Merton school pupils are living in an area of deprivation (30% most deprived, IDACI 2015). Since 2010 we have seen an increase of children who are eligible for free school meals.



The two main reasons why a child becomes looked after in Merton are abuse or neglect (43%) and absent parenting (22%): nationally abuse or neglect (62%) is the most dominant category, with family dysfunction (15%) next (this also represents 15% locally). This over representation of absent parenting can be accounted for by the higher numbers of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (accounting for around 20% of the Looked After Children cohort at a given time).

## 5 Looked After Children Consultation Feedback 'Your Life – Your Care'

In March 2018 Coram BAAF undertook the Bright Spots well-being indicator consultation with Looked After Children in Merton. The survey identified the areas where children appear to be flourishing and where things could be improved, providing an evidence base of children's experience and wellbeing to inform service improvements.

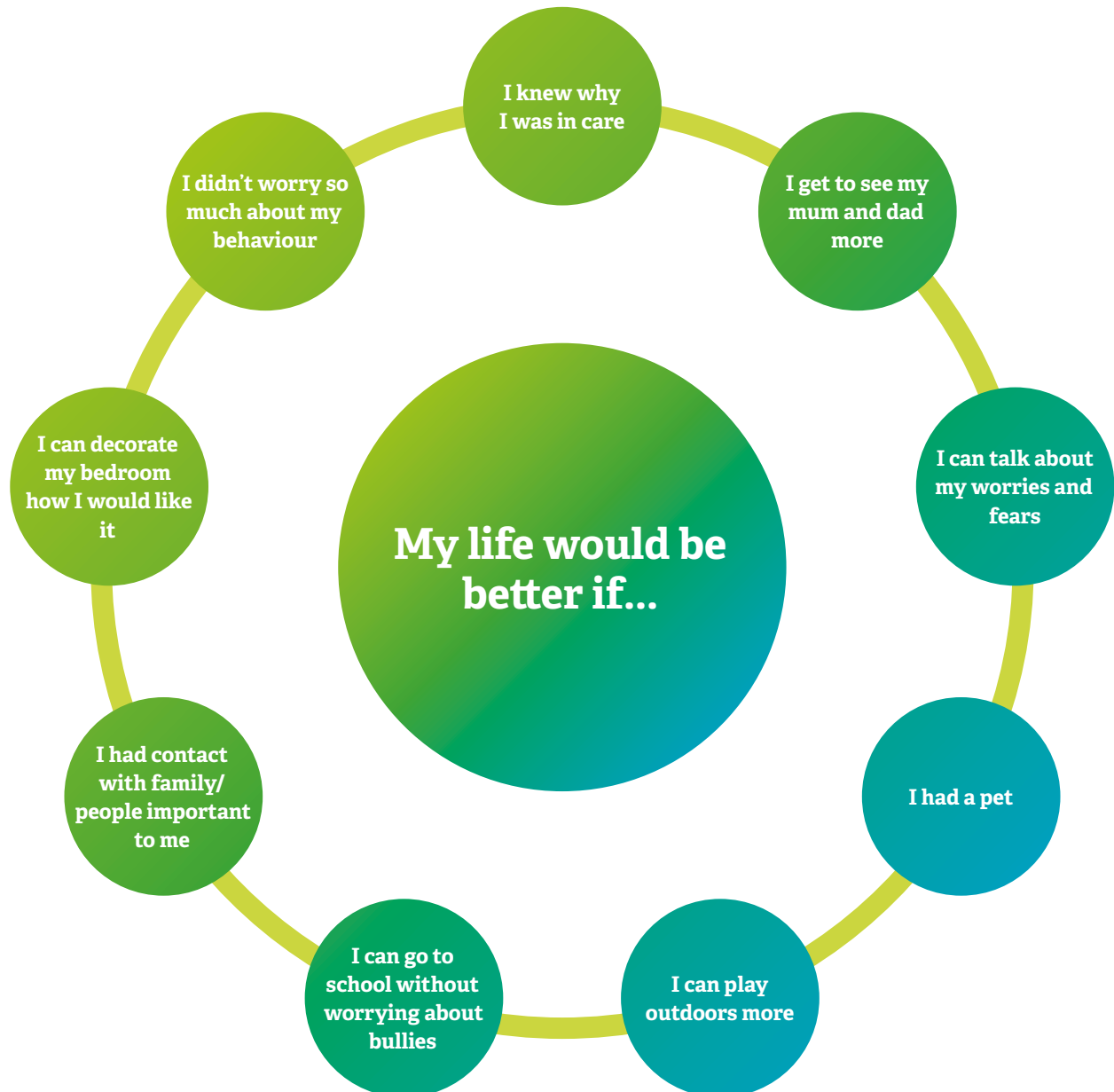
- The majority of children and young people reported they felt safe and settled in their homes
- 94% of young people (aged 12-18) and 78% of children (aged 5-11) felt their life was improving.
- The majority (94%) of children and young people (4-18yrs) felt safe in their homes 'all or most of the time'. As a benchmark, The Children's Worlds survey found that 75% of children (8-13yrs) in the general population felt 'totally safe' at home.
- Compared to the general population and other looked after young people a greater proportion of young people had very high scores (9 or 10) on the wellbeing scales.
- 84% of young people in Merton liked school.
- The majority (96%) of children and young people had a really good friend. This was similar to their peers (97%) in the general population.

		Merton	2018 average in 13 LAs	Peers in general population (10-17yrs)
Life satisfaction	High scores	36%	34%	27%
	Low scores	7%	15%	5%
Happiness yesterday	High scores	39%	39%	26%
	Low scores	11%	19%	8%
Things done are worthwhile	High scores	52%	36%	29%
	Low scores	0%	12%	6%
Positive about future	High scores	44%	35%	19%
	Low scores	4%	11%	7%

## 6 The Looked After Children and Care Leavers Pledge

The Children in Care Council will design and launch a new Pledge in 2019.

These are some of the comments children said in the Bright Spots consultation which would make their life better.





## Strategic Priorities for Merton Looked After Children 2018 – 2021 and 'Our Pledge' to Merton Looked After Children

- 1** Looked After Children have their voices heard and their views respected.

Pledge to children:  
***Your voice will be heard, what you say matters.***
- 2** Looked After Children feel safe and have stability.

Pledge to children:  
***You will have somewhere safe to call home.***
- 3** Looked After Children have good health and well-being.

Pledge to children:  
***We will help you with your worries and fears.***
- 4** Looked After Children are supported to be aspirational and achieve their full potential in education and take part in hobbies or interest of their choice.

Pledge to children:  
***We will do the best we can to support you, so you can do your best at school, have hobbies and interests and time for fun.***
- 5** Looked After Children develop trusting supportive relationships and maintain links with important people in their lives.

Pledge to children:  
***We will make sure you have people in your life who are important to you and someone you can trust.***
- 6** Looked After Children are supported to leave care and to transition to adulthood.

Pledge to children and young people:  
***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.***

1

## Looked After Children have their voices heard and their views respected.

Pledge to children:

**Your voice will be heard, what you say matters.**

All children in care have a right to have their wishes and feelings heard when decisions about their futures are being made. This right is enshrined in international law in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and in domestic law through the Children Act 1989.

### What we do

Ofsted 2017 reported:

*'Children's participation is encouraged, their individual needs are known and their voice is evident. Children have access to advocates wherever they are placed, and participation in reviews continues to strengthen. A committed and active Children in Care Council (CiCC) influences service developments and provides consultation and feedback on issues relating to their experiences'.*

A central component of Merton's User Voice Strategy is a commitment to encouraging and supporting Looked After Children to give us feedback: ensuring that their views are key to informing decisions about care planning as well as informing wider service planning and delivery.

We have commissioned an independent advocacy service, Jigsaw4u to provide support to Looked After Children to ensure that their voice is heard and is central to decisions being made about their care. The quarterly feedback we receive from the advocacy service influences our practice and service strategy.

We have supported Looked After Young People to be involved in fostering preparation training and foster carer support group meetings, including being involved in recruitment and successfully interviewing and supporting the appointment of the current Director of Children, Schools and Families.

*Our Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service is growing stronger to support and monitor how we ensure that every child's view and wish is heard in decisions about their care plans.*

We facilitate young people's forums and activities which link with and impact on the management of children's services and the adult democratic process. These include the Children in Care Council, Youth Parliament, Young Advisors and Young Inspectors. Young Advisors recently completed a consultation on safety. Young Inspectors are currently working on projects related to service reviews and commissioning.

Feedback from children and young people across these strands of work have informed strategies including the Children and Young People's Plan, this Looked After Children Strategy 2019 -2021 and children's departmental service plans.

### Merton's commitment to improvement

- We will use a comprehensive range of tools to engage with children and young people to ensure that the child's voice is recorded in: referrals; assessments; care plans; court statements and court care plans; personal education plans (PEPs); health assessments; supervision records; fostering and adoption records; and in pathway plans.
- Each Looked After Children will have access to an independent advocate to consult with, represent their views and / or advocate on their behalf.
- Children and young people will be supported to actively participate in their reviews about their care. Independent Reviewing Officers will ensure that the care plan fully reflects their needs and each child's wishes and feelings are given due consideration.
- We will develop the Children in Care Council involving children with disabilities, unaccompanied asylum seeking children, and children placed out of borough.

- The voice of the Looked After Child via Symphony (named by our CICC) will be represented at the Corporate Parent Forum and be heard by the Chief Executive, Cabinet Member and Director.
- Looked After Child and Care Leavers voice will inform development of the Children and Young People's Plan to help shape future services, and we will feed back to them about the changes we have made in light of their contributions. This engagement will create an opportunity for Symphony to review the objectives in the plan and report on the improvements to practice and their experience of care.
- Merton's participation manager will work with the CICC to review the Children in Care Pledge to ensure it includes the up to date views of our Looked After Children.
- We will develop and improve upon the formal complaints procedure to respond to Looked After Children and Young People in an age appropriate way, offering face to face resolutions where possible.

## Impact measures

- Audits evidence the child's voice is contained in documents relating to their care.
- Percentage of children in our care that participate in their reviews.
- Number of referrals to the advocacy service.
- Number of complaints received by Looked After Children with positive resolutions.

2

## Looked After Children feel safe and have stability in their lives

Pledge to children:

***You will have somewhere safe to call home.***

Children and young people need to live somewhere they feel safe and cared for: a place they can call home; a place free from abuse and harm; and a place where they feel free and confident to express their views. Providing stability relies on identifying the right placement for a child early in their time in care whilst ensuring that individual and family needs are properly assessed and support services are provided enabling a safe return home or early permanence.

For many children, returning home to their family after a period in care will be the route to permanence and stability. For others, the home of other family members or friends under a formal or informal arrangement will be the setting they need in order to thrive. Remaining in care with a long term foster family or finding a permanent family through Special Guardianship or Child Arrangement Orders are other routes to permanence. In some cases adoption is the best option.

Research shows that positive experiences of returning home to family are preceded by careful assessment of needs, improvements in parenting capacity, slow and well managed returns home and the provision of services to support children and their families.



## What we do

Safety, Security and Permanence is central to care planning, it begins with the birth family at the point of referral and remains the priority in every service area.

We believe that children should be supported in their families whenever possible and that their families should be given extra support to keep them together. The decision for a child or young person to live in local authority care is a life changing event and should only happen with due consideration of all the alternatives and with the needs of the child or young person at the forefront of our consideration. To ensure that this belief is prioritised, Merton is committed to ensuring that any decision to accommodate a child or young person between the ages of 0-16 is reviewed and a robust care plan is put in place with purposeful social work with children and their families to prepare and support the return, that has a focus on short and long term care planning.

To enable children to remain at home or return home FST, family systemic therapy, and MST, multi systemic therapy is delivered through the Positive Families Partnership (PFP).

Ofsted 2017 reported:

*'Looked After Children in Merton receive a consistently good service. The needs of each individual child are known well. Children become looked after at the right time and without unnecessary delay. Appropriate support and edge-of-care services are used effectively as an alternative to care. Effective management oversight of pre-proceedings and assessment work adds rigour to decision-making and ensures safe oversight of the experiences for children on the threshold of being looked after. Assessments for children returning home are robust and ongoing support is provided to the families.'*

We have a longstanding approach to preventing children becoming looked after. If we understand that it is in the best interest of the child to become looked after, we seek to ensure that our care plans appropriately safeguard our children and support decisions around permanency. As such we pursue permanency in the form of returning home, placements with friends and family as connected

persons, long term fostering, residential care, special guardianship orders and adoption.

Our annual Looked After Children sufficiency statement supports us to target our placement needs and procure appropriate care for our children.

We track each looked after child so that we can ensure that services are coordinated to support the child's journey, permanence is on track, the placement is appropriate and any unnecessary delay is avoided.

Ofsted 2017 reported:

*'Diversity is given careful consideration. Risks associated with going missing and sexual exploitation are known and effectively tracked on a multi-agency basis, and effective work is undertaken to ensure that children are kept safe.'*

To maintain a safe borough for our Looked After Children and to further reduce the risk of exploitation and harm of children most at risk or vulnerable to exploitation or harming others, caused by gangs and groups, the Police and Children's Social Care have developed an integrated multi-agency risk, vulnerability and exploitation (MARVE) panel. The panel provides workers with clear definitions, responses, pathway routes and actions plans. The serious youth violence and criminal exploitation protocol offers a clear process in regard to responses, pathway routes, action plans and responsibilities for Looked After Children.

## Merton's commitment to improvement

- The Practice Model will support us in building positive relationships with children and families to help parents and carers create solutions so that their children can remain at home or be safely reunited when it is in their best interest. Care plans will contain specific actions, achievable timescales and clear, measurable outcomes that can be understood by children and their families.

- At an early stage of concern, we will use Family Group Conferencing to identify and engage wider family members and friends to support the care plan and prevent child protection concerns escalating to the Public Law Outline (PLO), proceedings and ultimately children entering care.
- We will develop a Permanence Policy and review our early permanence processes promoting best practice in securing 'early permanence' and stability for children.
- We will continue with our effective fostering recruitment and retention campaign to further increase our number of in house foster carers. Matching will be informed by good assessments of the child's needs, including the child's developmental and projected needs (considering the impact of trauma) and will include a support plan for the foster carer.
- When difficulties arise in a child's placement we will respond quickly by bringing the multi-agency network together to maintain the child's placement, offering robust bespoke packages of care and to prevent a placement breakdown,.
- For children placed out of borough who have complex needs and require specialist placements, we will regularly review their needs at the Placement Panel to ensure placements continue to meet their assessed Education Health and Care Plan and care plan needs.
- We will work closely with the South London Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) to ensure a smooth transition of the Merton Adoption Service to the RAA, along with Sutton, Richmond, Kingston and Wandsworth, without compromising the outstanding Adoption Service we currently offer.
- We will enhance our pathway services for separated, trafficked and unaccompanied asylum seeking children and those exercising their treaty rights in the UK, so responsibility is clear and pathway planning efficient and effective to enable young people to feel safe and secure about their future.

## Impact measures

- Percentage of Looked After Children returning home
- Number of placement breakdowns
- Percentage of placements with in house foster carers
- Number of individual Looked After Children in our care who go missing
- Percentage of Looked After Children for 2.5 years or more who have been in the same placement continuously for 2 years
- Percentage of children with 3 or more placements
- Percentage of placements out of borough
- Percentage of placements more than 20 miles

### 3

## Looked After Children have good health and well-being

Pledge to children:

**We will help you with your worries and fears**

Looked After Children are four times more likely to have mental health problems than children in the general population. Poor mental health is caused by the interaction of a variety of factors, including inherited characteristics and children's exposure to abuse before they enter care. Consequences of poor mental health for Looked After Children include a greater risk of instability in care and poor educational outcomes.

Research over the last decade provides compelling evidence that Looked After Children are at greater risk of experiencing poor mental health than children in the general population (McCann et al, 1996\*) Children with disruptive and hyperactive behaviours are at particularly high risk of placement breakdown, as their carers can struggle to cope.

Children often enter the care system with a poorer level of physical and mental health than their peers, and their longer-term outcomes remain worse. Nationally two thirds of Looked After Children have at least one physical health complaint, and nearly half have mental health concerns. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire is an emotional and behavioural screening questionnaire for 3-16 year olds. The tool is used by professionals to help identify Looked After Children who may require additional mental health support.

### What we do

Health outcomes for Merton Looked After Children are better than the national average. These are supported by positive working relationships with NHS Trusts with good levels of routine health surveillance and access to specialist provision where necessary e.g. CAMHs.

The Looked After Children's health team provides a 'Moving on Health Summary' for our young people who are leaving care. This contains information

on the young person's GP, vaccinations, allergies, medication, health promotion and a number of contact details, including email addresses and phone numbers that may be useful now or relevant in the future, such as sexual health clinics and helplines.

We have invested in an in-house mental health service for our children and young people by commissioning CAMHs (Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service). This ensures that there is an early intervention programme providing timely support for Looked After Children, the foster carers and the social workers, to support the child / young person and wider network before mental health problems become ingrained and increase in severity, impacting significantly on the child / young person's emotional wellbeing, their ability to maintain their placement, to focus on their educational attainment and enjoy their childhood.

Specialist substance misuse services, Catch22, are commissioned by Merton to provide a full range of support and therapeutic interventions for young people under the age of 25 using substances to the degree it affects their ability to live a healthy, functioning life. Over the last year the services have engaged young people referred for targeted interventions via schools, the youth justice service and other voluntary and statutory agencies by providing structured programmes of support and education to reduce or cease drug / alcohol use.

### Merton's commitment to improvement

- We will continue to improve on the timescale of initial health assessments to ensure that health needs are identified early and prioritised, developing a health reviewing system 3 months after the initial health assessment to track health progress and initial recommendations.
- We will provide opportunities for children to talk about their worries and fears, through direct work, an advocate / mentor / befriender or trusted adult.
- We will continue to ensure that the early identification of mental health concerns for children is responded to with a timely

\*McCann, J B, James, A, Wilson, S et al (1996) Prevalence of psychiatric disorders in young people in the care system. *British Medical Journal*, 313, 1529-1530.

intervention programme for the child, the foster carers and social workers, to provide support for the child / young person and wider network before mental health problems become ingrained and increase in severity.

- CAMHs, with oversight of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, will ensure early identification of needs and appropriate intervention: these will be reviewed 6 monthly.
- We will provide specific training to understand and respond to the experiences of trauma on children, young people and adopted children to create affective intervention strategies to support their emotional wellbeing.
- When young people are identified as having a substance misuse problem, we will continue to work with partner agencies (Catch22) to support young people and continue to develop preventative strategies.
- We will develop a joint protocol for transitioning young people to adult services to ensure their emotional, mental health and physical health needs are appropriately captured.
- We will continue to ensure that all Care Leavers receive information on their health histories and summaries on or prior to their 18th birthday.

## Impact measures

- Percentage of immunisations up to date.
- Percentage of Strengths and Difficulties questionnaires completed within appropriate time.
- SDQ average score
- Percentage of Care Leavers have their health summary.
- Percentage of Initial Health Assessments (IHAs) and Review Health Assessments completed in time scales.
- Percentage of Dental checks
- Number of Looked After Children who need CAMHs and are offered and receive a service.

4

**Looked After Children are supported to be aspirational and achieve their full potential in education, hobbies and interests of their choice**

Pledge to children:

***We will do the best we can for you, so you can do your best at school, have hobbies and interests and time for fun.***

Local authorities are required to discharge their statutory duty under section 22(3A) of the Children Act 1989 to promote the educational achievement of Looked After Children: this includes those children placed out-of-authority. The Children and Families Act 2014 amends section 22 of the Children Act 1989 requiring every local authority in England to appoint an officer employed by the authority, or another authority, to make sure that its duty to promote the educational achievement of its Looked After Children is properly discharged (Virtual School Head).

Social workers, Virtual School Head (VSH), IROs, school admission officers and special educational needs departments should work together to ensure that, except in an emergency, appropriate education provision for a child is arranged at the same time as a care placement. All Looked After Children should have a Personal Education Plan (PEP) which should form a part of the child's care plan or detention placement plan.

Hobbies and interests benefit children in many ways. They offer a child and young person the opportunity to discover themselves and build their self-esteem, develop peer relationships, establishing friendships, improve their social skills, widen their network and increase their involvement in the community. They can teach children to set and achieve goals, solve problems and make decisions, and they can assist with a young person's emotional wellbeing. The child or young person can develop lifelong interests or careers.

## What we do

Our Virtual School provides a dedicated service for Merton's Looked After Children from their early years beyond leaving care wherever they live or are educated. The school's specialist Advisory Teachers in primary, secondary and post sixteen phases of education, work to champion the needs of all Looked After Children and Care Leavers. This ensures that they all have access to high quality schooling, education or training provision.

*The Virtual School also liaises with the Early Years Team to promote quality provision for younger children. For children of statutory school age, the Virtual School closely monitors school attendance, progress and attainment.*

The PEP is used to challenge and support schools and settings, social workers and carers to accelerate pupil progress and ensure good educational outcomes. The Virtual School distributes Pupil Premium funding according to the grant's terms and conditions and contributes to the funding of interventions to meet identified needs.

When a young person is unable to access mainstream school or the curriculum, for example children with complex educational needs or an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child, the Virtual School ensure there are a number of bespoke educational provisions available to meet children's differing needs, such as a residential school, special school and ESOL opportunities, this is to ensure that all children have equal access to an educational facility.

Through effective advocacy, negotiation, improved SEN provision and inclusive practice, no child in Merton's care has been permanently excluded from school for the last five years. Carers, social workers, school staff, and young Care Leavers have direct access to the Virtual School for advice and guidance to ensure that education and training is integral to and supported as part of a child's care or pathway plan.

A dedicated worker for Looked After Children was identified within the 'My Futures' team to enable earlier planning and support for young people during their GCSE years and transition to post 16 opportunities. We have focused on ensuring there

are robust pathway plans for all older Looked After Children which is reflected in the increase in young people entering further and higher education and relatively low number of young people who are not in education employment or training (NEET).

The Virtual School, through providing information and advice on a range of educational and related support issues to foster carers and practitioners enables them to become good advocates for children in terms of their education and assists them to understand their roles and responsibilities.

The Virtual School Head provides an annual report to the Corporate Parenting Board and to the Children and Young Person's Scrutiny Panel as part of the annual School Standards panel report. The report currently covers all aspects of education for Looked After Children and the engagement in education and training for Care Leavers .

## Merton's commitment to improvement

- We will continue to work with Early Years Specialists, carers and settings to develop robust Early Years PEPs for 2, 3 and 4 year olds, ensuring that their specific and individual educational needs are recognised with the support of the early years premium.
- We will endeavour to use only good or outstanding schools and / or residential educational placements, except in exceptional circumstances where placements are enabling the young person to flourish, when senior management authorisation will be sought.
- We will ensure that the Personal Educational Plans and reviews maximise the use of educational and recreational activities, helping children and young people develop their potential outside of formal education, increasing their interests in extracurricular activities and to take part in school programmes: improving their self-esteem; confidence; social skills; and enhancing their social networks.



- We will ensure that for children with special educational needs, disabilities or an EHCP we continue to facilitate diverse ranges of communication methods to enable these children to influence their PEP.
- We will ensure that where children are placed at a distance we maintain a full service offer, with members of the Virtual School attending PEP meetings.
- We will identify the predicted GCSE outcomes for young people when they are in year 9: understanding the barriers to progression and identifying personalised packages of support through targeted use of the pupil premium; celebrating success through annual “Celebrating Achievements” awards, recognising academic, sporting and personal achievement.
- We will as part of our NEET strategy, embrace the ‘Aim Higher’ project encouraging children and young people to have greater aspirations for themselves, to include: engaging in further education; taking up apprenticeships; aspiring to university; and creating opportunities for second-chance learning for Looked After Children when they have obtained greater stability. To support this we will continue to incorporate earlier support for transition to education, training or employment into the pathway plans at Year 11.
- We will support carers to fulfil their important role in supporting education by providing learning support at home, supporting children with their homework, reading to children at night, engaging with school staff and attending parents evening, ensuring placement stability prevents disruption to the child’s placement.
- We will ensure children and young people who do not attend school are accessing 25 hours per week of good quality registered alternative provision.

## Impact measures

- Percentage of Looked After Children with over 90% attendance.
- Percentage of children taking part in after school and leisure activities.
- Percentage of PEPs completed within timescale.
- Percentage of Looked After Children who are NEET.
- Percentage of Looked After Children entering further education.

The impact on outcomes will also be measured via the national benchmark attainment data, positive destinations, and the increase in the number of Care Leavers in Education, Employment or Training



## 5

### Looked After Children develop trusting and supportive relationships and maintain links with important people in their lives

Pledge to children:

***We will make sure you have people in your life who are important to you and someone you can trust.***

The Children Act 1989 requires that local authorities promote and support contact between children who are looked after and their families unless it is not in the best interest of the child's welfare. The Children and Families Act 2014, makes changes to the arrangements for contact between Looked After Children and their families with the aim of reducing the disruption caused by inappropriate contact.

Children need positive relationships with at least one trusted adult who can be relied upon to provide practical and emotional support wherever they are placed. Supportive relationships based on mutual caring and trust can make all the difference to someone's life and outcomes. For most people, bonds with family and friends underpin well-being and resilience to life's challenges, yet these are precisely the bonds that are often lacking for some of the most vulnerable children, including Looked After Children.

Attachment theory provides the foundation for understanding that a relationship with a significant adult is essential for healthy emotional and cognitive development for children and young people. Relationships between children and young people and older peers and adults tend to develop and flourish naturally, often through school or activities such as sport, however for Looked After Children these relationships can be disrupted when children move from one placement to another.

The presence of a trusted adult tends to be associated with better outcomes therefore an enabling framework needs to be embedded in the care system: one that can maximise the opportunity for natural supportive relationships to occur and flourish. This includes: maintaining relationships with previous carers; building the capacity of the team that already exists around a child to operate as an enabling network; and creating the possibility of a new connection by structuring the means for

introducing a child to a willing, supportive adult who is prepared to dedicate time and thought to them.

### What we do

Planning contact with birth family members is given careful consideration at the care planning stage and is constantly reviewed until the permanence plan is achieved and subsequently reviewed at each looked after review. Contact is determined by the needs of the child and what is in their best interest and is changed over time to meet the child's continuing needs and wishes.

Permanence Plans ensure that children are supported to develop a sense of belonging and identity that addresses the complex and varied meanings of "family" that they have experienced, whilst in care, and going on into adulthood.

The Adoption Service ensure that there is a clear contact plan for birth parents. When a child is adopted, we come to an agreed arrangement with their birth relatives and their adopters for allowing the child and their birth family to keep in touch. This arrangement, called Letterbox, allows the child and their birth family to exchange letters, cards and photographs without knowing each other's personal details.

We work closely with the designated teacher of the looked after child to ensure that each child is given the opportunity to speak to a trusted adult in school.

We commission a befriending service from Jigsaw4u to Merton Looked After Children between the ages of 8 and 18 years of age. The service matches adults to our vulnerable children and the befrienders provide real help and support for any child who may be going through a difficult time. Having a trusted adult at these times helps the child to get through the difficulty, enable them to perform better at school or act as a link to the child or young person's community by spending time out on activities together.

## Merton's commitment to improvement

- Each looked after child or young person will understand how they came to be looked after through direct work, words and pictures and an information letter. Life story books and later life letters will be prepared for adopted children.
- Each child will have their own identified family / friend network plan, evidencing how the child benefits from the relationships and how those relationships can be supported whilst the young person is in care and when they leave care. Where children have a plan for return home, the focus will be on maintaining relationships to help promote a successful reunification.
- We will enhance our family approach to parenting for Looked After Children in foster placements enabling the child to experience more opportunities to play, with carers making sure the child knows they are safe and providing them a sense of belonging.
- We will develop the social work skills to work with children who experience difficulties forming relationships, for example children with a Learning Disability, Autistic Spectrum Disorder, Asperger's, complex needs, or who have suffered or are suffering PTSD.
- We will work with children, young people and partner agencies to understand the impact of social media and technology on children and young people's ability to form friendships and relationships beyond a screen.
- Contact with the birth family will continue to be given careful consideration and planning. Changes to contact will be endorsed by the Independent Reviewing Officer at the looked after review. When it is not in the child's best interest to have contact with family members we will help children to understand why contact cannot take place.

- We will continue to offer adoption counselling for birth parents whose children have been adopted, supporting parents to manage their feelings around adoption and helping the parent to maintain the letter box contact.
- Unaccompanied Asylum seeking children will be assisted through the Red Cross service to identify family members, and will be supported to form relationships in the community and develop and strengthen their network.

## Impact measures

- Percentage of children with identified friends and family's plan.
- Percentage of in-house Foster carers attending workshops on relevant training.
- Number of referrals to independent visitor.
- Number of Looked After Children who cease to be Looked After.



## 6

### Looked After Children are supported to leave care and transition to adulthood

Promise to children and young people:

***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.***

Young people face a complex mix of challenges as they live their life in care. For Care Leavers who have: mental health issues; learning difficulties; experienced the criminal justice system; or struggled to stay on at school, they are more likely to face an insecure future especially if they are not able to secure employment or further their education. This will impact on their wellbeing and life chances.

The path to adulthood also brings with it a change to the services a Care Leaver can expect, as they grow up. Where relationships with parents have been poor this can impact significantly on teenagers and young adults who lost that secure base when they were younger and who will experience this again when they leave care: these factors can impact on a young person's mental health.

Half of Looked After Children have a mental health diagnosis, most commonly conduct disorder, with 70% of children in a residential accommodation having a mental health diagnosis. Adverse childhood experiences (ACE's) are stressful events occurring in childhood which can have a long lasting impact on children's ability to think, interact with others and on their learning. Care Leavers are more likely to go to prison or commit suicide than their peers.

There is evidence that having a trusted adult providing support in a young person's life can mitigate some of the impact of abuse and other adverse experiences of childhood.

The Ministry of Justice and Home Office recognise that young adults who have been in care can be particularly vulnerable as they transition into adulthood, particularly if they are in the criminal justice system. They are also at a higher risk of being drawn into crime. Equally we know that Care Leavers can be particularly vulnerable to becoming a victim of crime, including in some cases falling victim to grooming and exploitation online or offline.

Despite the recent reduction in the number of first time entrants to the criminal justice system, and a welcome drop in the number of children imprisoned in England and Wales, Looked After Children are vastly over-represented in the youth justice system: Looked After Children and Care Leavers account for less than one per cent of the population (The Care Leavers Association, 2013) yet almost a third of adults in prison have been looked after by a local authority at some point (HMIP, 2012).

### What we do

Merton has maintained and strengthened services for Care Leavers to support them as they become adults. Our ambitions for all Looked After Children and Care Leavers remain high.

In addition to a targeted Care Leaver's strategy we also formalised our commitment to all Care Leavers by signing up to a co-developed Charter in February 2013 which will be reviewed in 2019 by the Children in Care Council and Care Leavers. Our organisational structure, through the 14+ Team, supports delivery of our ambitions and ensures that we develop long lasting proactive relationships with our young people.

A number of our Care Leavers choose to continue to support the Children in Care Council and more choose to informally keep in touch with us for advice, guidance and kinship.

We have an Income and Maximisation Officer who supports Care Leavers with their benefits, running successful sessions with our young people prior to them leaving care; so that they can be supported in advance with the benefits they may be entitled to, with budgeting and financial assessments.

Our housing department and placements team work together to review the transition plans for Care Leavers and young people rising 18, to determine which young people are able to move into their own home through the nominations process.

Ofsted 2017 reported:

*“Care Leavers do well in Merton. The vast majority are in touch with staff, and determined efforts are made to re-engage with those who are not. Care Leavers feel safe where they live and they achieve well. The vast majority of Care Leavers are supported well. They develop the skills that they need to live independently and to achieve their career and education goals.”*

## **Merton’s commitment to improvement**

To ensure that Care Leavers receive the highest priority, we have worked with our Care Leavers and partners to develop a Care Leaver Strategy 2018-2021 which targets issues beyond the age of 18 to 25, relating to: housing; employment; health and well-being.

- We will continue to provide robust and effective management oversight of young people from the age of 16 onwards to ensure that those young people transitioning through to the care leaving services have every aspect of their needs considered in their pathway plan, to ensure a greater degree of success as they approach adulthood.
- We will ensure that the first statutory review following a 16th birthday will consider staying put arrangements post 18: ensuring care planning takes into account changing relationships between the foster carer and young person over time as the young person matures.
- We will assist young people to develop good support networks and sustain significant relationships to reduce the impact of loneliness, isolation or lack of confidence when moving onto independence.
- We will provide access to and support for Looked After Children in taking up the free national citizenship scheme (NCS) for 16-18 year olds enhancing their social skills and confidence.

- We will develop a clear transition protocol and work effectively between children and adult services, ensuring much closer collaboration in developing accommodation and support packages for young adults with complex needs.
- We will continue to develop housing options post 18 to include a number of realistic and suitable accommodation types, offering choice and affordability.
- We will educate and train foster carers to have specific knowledge and skills to care for and prepare young people with SEN or a disability, mental health and / or asylum seeking / separated young people for independence.
- We will offer young people aged 17 specific workshops on budgeting, claiming universal credit and housing benefit and sustaining tenancies.
- We will continue to develop the Local Offer for Care Leavers, providing information about the services and support that is available.

## **Impact measures**

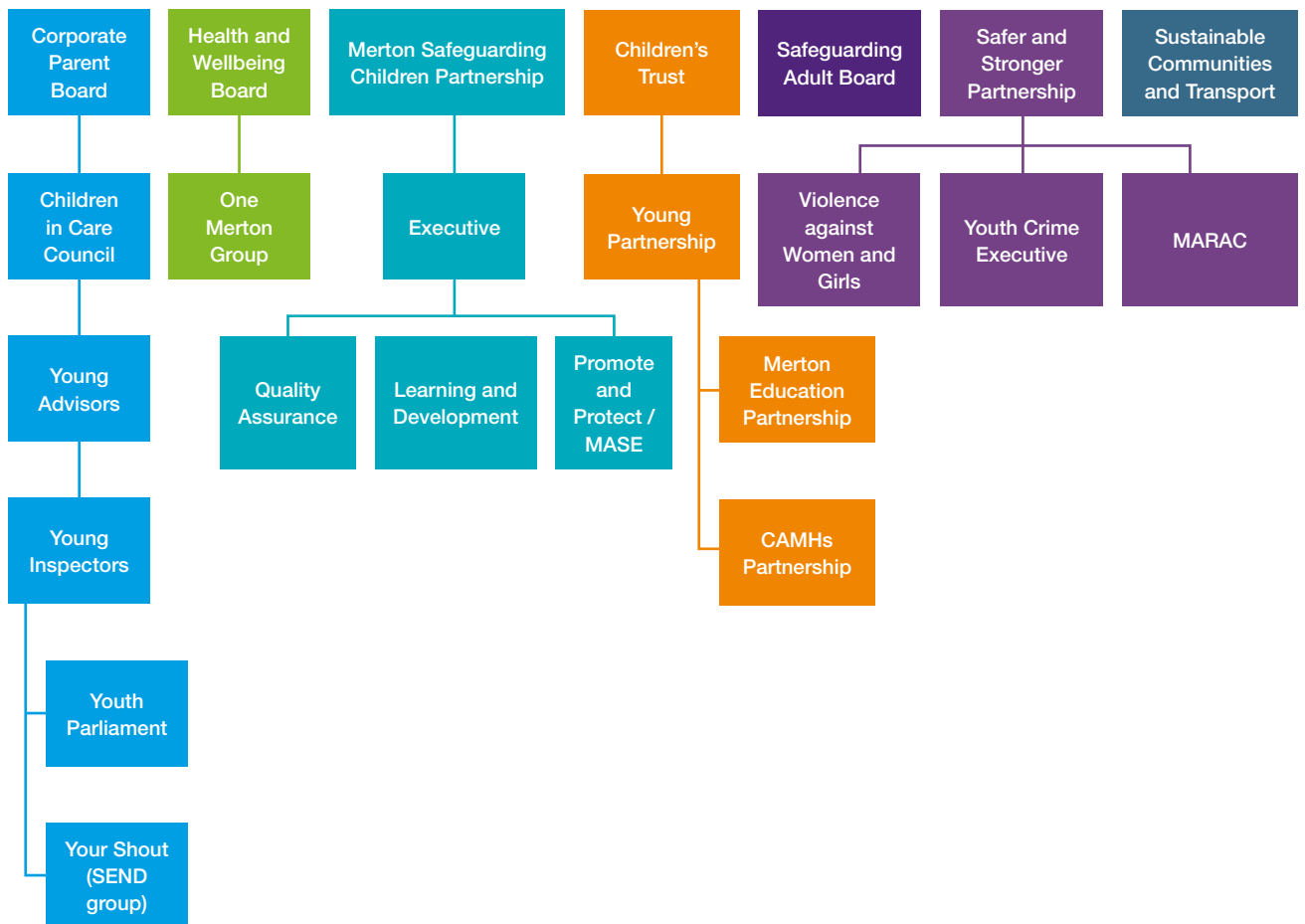
Measures for successful transitions for Care Leavers are in the Care Leavers Strategy 2019-2021.

- Percentage of Care Leavers with up to date Pathway Plan.

## 8 Merton's Governance and Strategic Partnerships

This Looked After Children's Strategy is not a stand-alone publication. The Children and Young People's Plan sets out our high level ambitions for all children and young people in the borough, including our Looked After Children. This is enhanced by this Looked After Children Strategy and our Care Leavers Strategy, which are both endorsed by the Children's Trust, the Merton Safeguarding Children Partnership and the Corporate Parenting Board.

The Corporate Parenting Board is comprised of senior managers and officers from across the council and partners representing education, health, housing, social care and elected members. The Board is chaired by the Chief Executive, ensuring a high level of scrutiny and cross directorate responsibility for delivery of our priorities.



## 9 Our Corporate Parenting responsibilities

The Children and Social Work Act 2017 is intended to improve support for Looked After Children and Care Leavers. The Act sets out corporate parenting principles for the council as a whole to be the best parent it can be to children in its care.

When a child comes into care, the council becomes the Corporate Parent. Put simply, the term 'Corporate Parent' means the collective responsibility of the council, elected members, employees, and partner agencies, for providing the best possible care and safeguarding for the children who are looked after by the council. A child in the care of the council looks to the whole council to be the best parent it can be to that child. Every member and employee of the council has the statutory responsibility to act for that child in the same way that a good parent would act for their child. Effective corporate parenting requires knowledge and awareness of the needs of children and young people who are looked after and the services that they receive. This is a shared responsibility for the Council as a whole.

The role of the Corporate Parent Board is to:

1. To take a multi-agency approach to promoting the needs and interests of children and young people in care and care leavers in Merton, and supporting them to achieve their potential
2. To oversee the continuing development and implementation of the strategies for children in and leaving, our care
3. To ensure the council is held accountable for its pledges to children in care and care leavers
4. To lead a multi-agency approach to corporate parenting

The Children in Care Council directly supports the Corporate Parenting Board to measure and monitor the effectiveness and quality of 'Corporate Parenting' in Merton. The group meets regularly with senior managers to discuss important issues affecting Looked After Children. The CICC has a standing agenda item at the Corporate Parenting Board.



# Looked After Children Strategy 2019-2021

children and young people  **merton partnership**  
working with merton's communities

