

Start Well

Childhood Adversity and Safeguarding

Introduction

This section focusses on low income, domestic abuse, parental mental health, parental and children and young people's substance misuse and on other vulnerable groups of children. A person's experiences during childhood lay down a foundation for the whole of their life, including physical and mental wellbeing. While Merton has generally lower rates of children living in deprived circumstances and consequently better health outcomes, numbers with poor outcomes remain substantial.

Vulnerable groups of children, like children with a Child Protection Plan, Children in Need, those who are in the care of the local authority, care leavers or in contact with the youth justice system have often been exposed to multiple childhood adversity in their family or social context. Childhood experience of multiple adversity is associated with poverty, deprivation and future adult ill health¹.

Childhood adversity includes verbal, physical and sexual abuse, domestic violence, parental mental illness, parental separation, parental substance misuse, separation and imprisonment. Experience of childhood adversity in the absence of protective factors, risks future mental and physical ill-health including the adoption of health-harming behaviours².

Poverty and Low Income

Growing up in poverty is damaging to child health and well-being and compared to adults, children are more likely to experience poverty and live in a low-income household³. Children and young people who are disabled are disproportionately affected by poverty and low income⁴.

In 2020-21, 12.0% of children in Merton aged 16 years and under were living in absolute low-income families⁵. This is 5,234 under 16s living in families with less than 60% of the average income, equivalent to around four children in a class of 30. The 2020-21 figures need to be treated with caution, especially when making comparisons with previous years because of the impact of COVID on data collection. However, looking at the percentage of children in absolute low-income families across 2015-2021, the trend in Merton is relatively stable at between 12-13%, and lower than both London and England rates⁵. For example, in 2019/20 the proportion of children in Merton living in absolute low incomes families aged under 16 years was 13.1%, compared to London at 14.6%, and England at 15.6%⁵. Children in households receiving Universal Credit is another poverty indicator. In Merton in May 2022 there were a total of 6,630 children in such families; in May 2021 there were 6,056 such children.

East Merton has a higher proportion of children living in poverty than West Merton, with Pollards Hill, Figge's Marsh and Cricket Green having the highest proportions in the borough⁵.

Figure 1 shows that in 2021 the gap in children living in poverty between the east and west of the borough was 12.2% and has remained relatively stable over time (Figure 2). Merton has the second highest percentage of children living in absolute low-income families of the boroughs in South-West London⁵.

Figure 1: The percentage (%) of children (aged under 16) living in Absolute low income families by Merton Wards, 2021. Source: Department for Work and Pensions⁵.

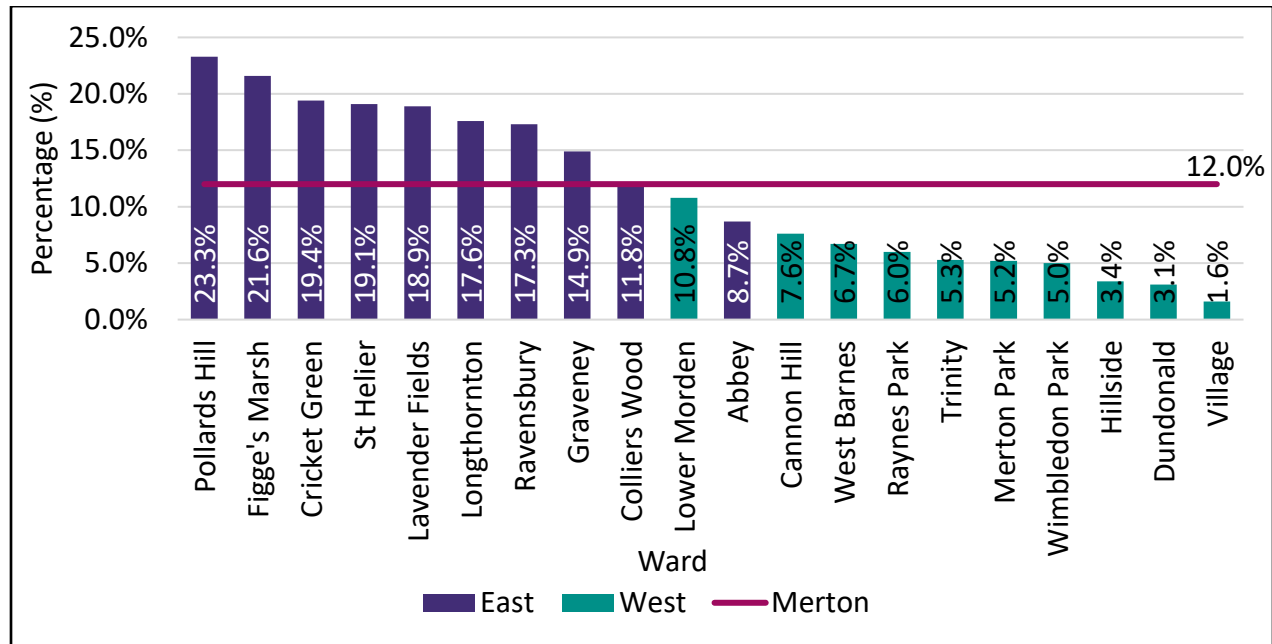
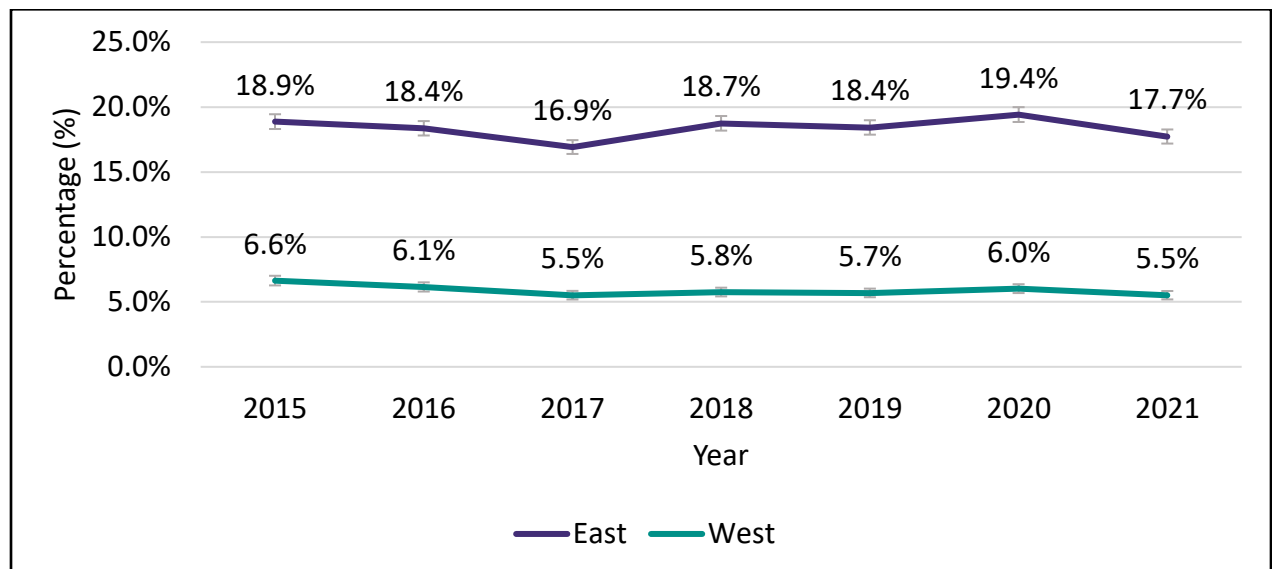


Figure 2: The percentage (%) of children (aged under 16) living in absolute low income families by East and West Merton between 2015 and 2021. Source: Department for Work and Pensions⁶.



The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSMs) is a useful proxy indicator for family income. In Merton 2021/22, the number of children eligible for FSMs was 6,757, which is 24.2% of school children in the borough, similar to London (24.6%) and higher than England (22.5%)⁷. This is an increase in the number of eligible children since 2015/16 (14.8%) in Merton⁷, and there has been a steeper rise from 2019/20 reflecting the negative financial impact of the pandemic.

It is important to note that this data on low income and FSM does not take into account the impact of recent cost of living increases and the likely disproportionate negative impact these will have across the borough, which needs to be closely monitored.

Domestic Abuse

In Merton in 2020-21, the rate of domestic abuse-related incidents and crimes reported by the police was 35.2 per 1,000 population compared to London (35.1) and England (30.3)⁸. This is a change from the pre-pandemic period of 2018/19 where the value of this indicator in Merton was 32.9 per 1,000 population⁸. Further data and information on domestic abuse in Merton can be found in the Healthy Places Chapter under Community Cohesion and Crime.

Merton Safeguarding Children Partnership has reported an increase in the number of domestic abuse cases coming to multi-agency risk assessment conferences between 2018-19 and 2021-22, including an increase in repeat cases and the number of children identified as in the household. It is believed that this is linked to COVID pandemic lockdowns.

Parental Mental Ill-health

Nationally, approximately 68% of women and 57% of men with mental health problems are parents⁹. Further data is needed to understand the proportion and experience of parents with mental ill-health in Merton.

Parental Substance Misuse

In Merton 2019/20, 20% of new presentations to treatment for alcohol and drug misuse were parents/adults living with children, compared to the England value of 21%¹⁰. In Merton, 2018/19, a rate of 10 to 11 per 1,000 children aged 0-17 years were living with an adult with alcohol dependence, this was lower than the England rate of 16 to 17 per 1,000 children, and similar to the benchmark value of 11 to 13 per 1,000 children¹¹. The benchmark value allows us to compare Merton indicators with an average of our neighbours, these include: Redbridge, Waltham Forest, Barnet, Bexley, Brent, Croydon, Ealing, Enfield, Haringey, Kingston upon Thames, Sutton, Wandsworth, Harrow, Hillingdon, Hounslow.

Further data around substance misuse and Merton residents can be found in the Live Well Chapter under Substance Misuse and Alcohol.

Poor parental mental health, substance misuse and domestic abuse are among the greatest risk factors for child health and wellbeing. The evidence around whether the pandemic has led to increases is complex and there is a need to monitor data on this.

Problematic Substance Misuse for Children and Young People

Alcohol and drug use increases with age. Those who start using substances early are at greater risk of problematic substance misuse. The latest national survey of substance misuse of 11-15 years old pupils in 2021 indicated that 9% of pupils had drunk alcohol in the last week, a decrease from 10% in 2018, and that 6% of pupils said that they had taken drugs in the last month, a decrease from 9% in 2018¹². The survey had also found 9% of 11-15 year old pupils were current e-cigarette users (using e-cigarettes at least or sometimes once a week), an increase from 6% in 2018. Those reported to be current users were higher amongst females aged 11-15 years at 10%, in comparison to males at 7%. To note, in comparison to 2018 the prevalence of male users has remained the same (7%) in comparison to the increasing trend for females from 5%¹³.

In Merton between 2018/19 to 2020-21, there were 25 admission episodes for persons aged under 18 years old due to alcohol, this was a rate of 17.6 per 100,000, similar to 2017/18 to 2019/20 (21.2 per 100,000) yet a decrease since 2006/07 to 2008/09 (44.3 per 100,000)¹⁴. To compare, the Merton 2018/19 to 2020-21 value was similar to London during the same period (14.3 per 100,000), and significantly lower than England (29.3 per 100,000). Rates between males (20.4 per 100,000) and females (14.5 per 100,000) in Merton were also similar¹⁵.

In Merton between 2018/19 to 2020-21, there were 30 hospital admissions for persons aged 15 to 24 years due to substance misuse, this is a rate of 51.7 per 100,000, similar to 2017/18 to 2019/20 (49.8 per 100,000)¹⁶. The Merton 2018/19 to 2020-21 value was similar to London during the same period (56.5 per 100,000), and significantly lower than England (81.2 per 100,000)¹⁷.

Young People in Contact with the Youth Justice System

In Merton 2020-21, the rate of children entering the youth justice system aged 10-17 years old was 2.6 per 1,000, this was lower compared to London (3.5 per 1,000) and similar to England (2.8 per 1,000)¹⁸. The number of first-time entrants to the Youth justice system has fallen significantly over the past decade both nationally and in Merton¹⁹.

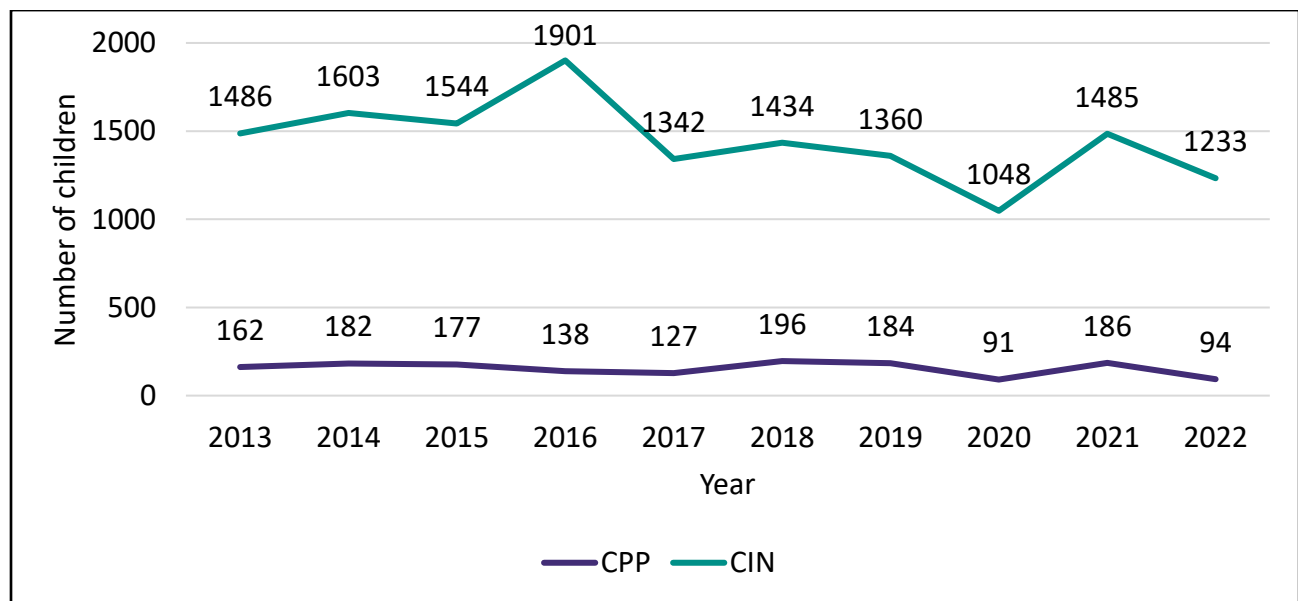
Children Protection and Children in Need

There were 94 children with a child protection plan in Merton in 2022 (March 31st), a rate of 19.7 per 10,000 population under the age of 18 years²⁰ compared to the London average of 37.5 per 10,000 and the England average of 42.1 per 10,000. In Merton 2022, 55% of Child Protection Plans were due to emotional neglect, while 28% were due to neglect²⁰.

There were 1,233 children in need (CIN) in Merton in 2022 (March 31st), a rate of 258.3 per 10,000 population under the age of 18 years, compared to the London average of 346.6 per 10,000 and the England average of 334.3 per 10,000²⁰. In 2022 in Merton, the proportion of CIN by category of need due to abuse or neglect was 49%²⁰.

The number of children with a Child Protection Plan in Merton has remained broadly stable over the past 8 years and the number of Children in Need has fluctuated more during this period (Figure 3). Though decreases were recorded in (March 31st) 2020, by (March 31st) 2021 numbers had returned to pre-pandemic levels, and again decreased by (March 31st) 2022²¹.

Figure 3: The number of children under the age of 18 years in Merton between 2013-22 categorised as Children in Need (CIN) or with Child Protection Plans (CPP), at March 31st. Source: GOV.UK, Explore Education Statistics²².



Looked After Children (LAC)

A ‘Looked After Child’ is a child that receives accommodation from a local authority for more than 24 hours, or a child that is subject to a care or placement order²³.

In Merton in 2021, there were 142 children in care, a rate of 30 per 10,000, lower than London (47 per 10,000) and England (67 per 10,000)²⁴. There has been no significant change to this value in the past decade in Merton.

In Merton 2020-21, 43.8% of looked after children’s emotional wellbeing was identified as a cause for concern. This is significantly higher than the London value of 30.5% and England 36.8%²⁵.

Service User and Resident Views

Merton Council, in partnership with Young London and local schools, launched a young residents survey during the summer of 2021 to better understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on this demographic. A key recommendation from the survey included safety, where young people wanted a better relationship with the police, more streetlights and CCTV to help feel safer locally²⁶.

Recommendations

This chapter highlights the need for further local data on deprivation and adversity by local geography and demography, including the impact of cost of living increases on families living on low income. Indirect adversities that require further data collection and analysis will be addressed in a substance misuse needs assessment. Further local data collection around variation of domestic abuse victims and young people in contact with the youth justice system by ethnic group in Merton is recommended.

Further Information

- 1) Adult substance misuse and alcohol
- 2) Cost of living & financial pressures

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