

# Key messages

## Start Well

### Headlines

Most children and young people living in Merton are healthy and have a good start in life, experiencing better health and related outcomes than the London and England average. However, not all children enjoy similar positive outcomes and the health divide is evident from the start of life.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant negative impact on children and young people, spanning mental health, child healthy weight, school readiness and education attainment; and risk factors and vulnerabilities were exacerbated by the pandemic, and are likely to be further aggravated by the cost-of-living crisis, i.e. food poverty. This is translating into increased referrals, i.e. for mental health support and Education, Health and Care Plans.

### Key statistics

#### Childhood adversity and safeguarding

- A person's experiences during childhood lays 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.
- In Merton, just over 5,000 children or four children in each school class of 30 on average are living in absolute low-income families (less than 60% of the average income). This is fewer than London and England, but East Merton has a significantly higher proportion than West.
- Both levels of child poverty and the gap between the East and West of the borough have remained broadly stable over the past six years, however these findings do not reflect the likely disproportionate impact of the recent cost of living crisis, which needs to be closely monitored.
- The level of eligibility for free school meals (FSM) has been increasing in Merton and is now similar to London, but we have seen a steeper increase from 2019/20, reflecting the negative financial impact of the pandemic and inflation.
- There were 94 children with a Child Protection Plan in Merton 2022 (March 31<sup>st</sup>) and 1,233 Children in Need, numbers for both were lower than any previous year in the past decade, apart from 2020 which was impacted by the COVID pandemic. Emotional

wellbeing of 44% of Looked After Children was identified as a cause for concern, significantly higher than London.

- 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 an increase in domestic violence is complex and there is a need to monitor data on this.
- National data on substance misuse among 11 to 15 year olds indicates that there has been a decrease in illicit drug use and no change in levels of drinking alcohol regularly. Although a decrease in prevalence of smoking cigarettes was reported, levels of vaping has increased among young people, particularly among girls aged 11-15 years, with 10% reporting being current e-cigarette users. There is no local data.

### Education

- Overall, most children and young people in Merton obtain good levels of development and attainment, attending schools and early years' settings that are rated good or outstanding by OFSTED. However, like nationally, lower proportions reach expected levels of development in more deprived areas, especially in the East. Early interim data for 2021/22 indicates that due to the COVID pandemic both nationally and locally there has been more than 6% reduction in children achieving a good level of development up to age 5 years.
- In Merton 20% of learning time in school was missed due to the COVID pandemic, equal to over 800,000 school days, which has had a negative impact on outcomes.
- Like nationally, provisional data for Merton indicates that there have been reductions in educational outcomes for children at both Reception (age 4 to 5 years) and Key Stage 2 (age 10 to 11 years). Nationally, the attainment gap at Key stage 2 between disadvantaged pupils and all other pupils has increased following the pandemic.
- There has been an increase in persistent absence in Merton during the pandemic which was 11% (2,600 pupils) in 2020/21.
- Home schooling has increased, with national data indicating a 7% increase in the number of children and young people electively home educated from 2020, suggesting this is a likely result of the pandemic.
- In 2020/21 there was a continuing increase in the proportion of Merton pupils with an Education Health and Care Plan, which was higher than London and England levels. Recent local activity indicates that the increase in EHCPs in Merton may be levelling off.

### Mental health

- Mental health needs amongst young people have increased during the pandemic. National survey findings indicate that 1 in 6 children had a probable mental health disorder in 2021, compared to 1 in 9 pre-pandemic. Nearly 2 in 5 children aged 6 to 16

years and over half of 17 to 23 year olds had experienced a deterioration in mental health since 2017.

- In Merton there has been an increase in school pupils with a social, emotional and mental health need identified through Special Educational Need (SEN) support use since pre-pandemic and is significantly higher than London and national levels.
- In Merton rates of hospital admissions for mental health conditions in under 18 year olds have reduced over the past six years, however, rates of hospital admission for self-harm remain higher than national levels.
- Eating disorders and disordered eating in children and young people increased during the pandemic. National survey findings indicate that the proportion of children and young people with possible eating problems have increased since 2017. This is reflected in urgent referrals for treatment for eating disorders among young people, which have doubled nationally and increased five-fold in South West London.

### Healthy weight

- Childhood obesity is a significant risk factor for poor physical and mental health and the pandemic has had a negative impact on children's weight resulting in an increase in overweight and obesity. Stigma associated with obesity can be particularly severe for children and young people and can also lead to disordered eating, avoidance of physical activity and avoidance of support.
- In Merton in 2019/20, nearly 1 in 5 children aged 4-5 years were overweight or living with obesity. Like nationally, during the primary school years levels increase significantly and just over 1 in 3 children aged 10-11 years in Merton were overweight or living with obesity, an increase of 17%. By the time young people reach adulthood this increases further, with 1 in 2 adults in Merton classified as overweight or obese.
- National data for 2021/22 indicates that the prevalence of obesity remains higher than any year up to 2019/20. Merton's data up until 2019/20 shows a higher proportion of children in East Merton wards are living with obesity compared to West Merton wards and the inequality gap in obesity between the East and West of the borough has been increasing since 2008/09.
- About half of children and young people aged 5-16 years in Merton are not physically active enough. International studies and London and national level data indicate that levels of activity declined during the pandemic.

### Maternal health and the newborn period

- Maternal health in Merton is generally better than in London and England
- Readmission to hospital of babies under 14 days old is significantly higher in Merton than London and England. National studies indicate that jaundice, feeding difficulties, and respiratory tract infections are the primary reasons for readmissions of babies

under 14 days, some of which are potentially avoidable. Neonatal mortality is similar to London and England.

- Emergency admissions to hospital for those aged under 1 year and 0-4 years are also significantly higher than London but lower than England. Further investigation of data and evidence is underway to understand what is driving these local trends.

### Childhood Immunisation and Newborn Screening

- In Merton, like London, immunisation uptake at age 5 and under is well below the 95% World Health Organisation (WHO) target and rates are generally lower than for England. However, there have been some improvements in Merton's position and uptake in 2020/21 which is now higher than London, apart from MMR first dose, MMR second dose, and the pre-school booster.
- Vaccine coverage is overall higher for children with GP Practices located in West Merton compared to East Merton. Analysis indicates that disruption caused by the pandemic is likely to have caused some of the decreases in vaccine coverage. This is most likely in the 12-month cohort, where some children would have been scheduled to receive their routine childhood immunisations from March 2020 onwards.
- Newborn hearing, bloodspot and infant physical examinations coverage are all above the London and England average. For newborn hearing screening, Merton is just slightly under the nationally set acceptability target of 98% at 97.9%.

### Conclusions to inform priorities

- **Further developing strategies to meet the need of children and young people with SEND on the basis of new in depth needs assessment.**
- **Holistic mental health support offer in response to increasing demand / need.**
- **Healthy weight programme considering the link to increase in disordered eating and food poverty.**
- **Responding to multiple adversity through Think Family and Healthy Place links, such as school streets and school super-zones.**
- **Specific concerns for further exploration include increasing CYP vaping, increasing school absences and air pollution impact, especially around schools.**