

Key messages

Age well

Headlines

The majority of older people are healthy; however an aging population, aggravated by the pandemic and now cost-of-living crisis, is leading to greater complexity of need due to several long-term conditions (multi-morbidities), increasing dementia rates, sensory impairment, frailty and loneliness/isolation. Particularly people with learning disabilities face health inequalities, including access to health care such as cancer screening.

Greater complexity, including social and welfare needs, is being reported by health, adult social care, and voluntary sector partners as well as carers and is putting increasing pressures on services. For example, some people with both learning disability and autism.

Key statistics

Dementia

- Dementia diagnosis is important as it allows both people diagnosed with dementia and their carers to plan and access support services. The dementia diagnosis rate among people aged 65 and over in Merton is 68.7% (2022) which is similar to the national target of 66.7% and similar to the London average of 66.8%. Dementia diagnoses fell during the pandemic, and have risen steadily since then.
- Merton has a high rate of emergency hospital admissions for people aged 65+ diagnosed with dementia compared with London and England. This is important because national research estimates that two thirds of emergency admissions for people living with dementia are avoidable with appropriate care and support e.g prevention of infections, falls and dehydration.

Physical Activity, Frailty and Falls

- Delaying and reducing the severity of frailty can help older people improve their quality of life and stay independent for longer.
- Falls are the number one reason for hospital admission amongst older people and one of the main reasons for needing residential care. The rate of hospital admissions due to falls amongst older people in Merton has historically been high but have been decreasing since 2017/18. Although reducing, the rates of hospital admissions are still significantly higher than the London average but similar to the England average.

- Rates of admissions in over 65's for hip fractures (as a consequence of a fall) in Merton have reduced to 429.4 per 100,000 in 2020/21 from 545 per 100,000 in 2018/19. This rate is similar to the London rate and significantly lower than the England rate.

Social Connectedness, Loneliness, and Isolation amongst Older People

- Loneliness and social isolation can directly impact our physical and mental health. Older people face a range of factors that put them at particular risk of loneliness such as ageing and bereavement (of partner and friends), increased risk of long- term conditions and the impact of frailty.
- Just over 1 in 10 Merton residents reported feeling lonely 'often or always' and groups such as older carers, LGBTQ older people and ethnic minority older people may face specific issues around loneliness.
- Digital exclusion is a key issue, with national survey evidence showing people over 75 are most affected. There is no local data.

Screening and vaccination

- COVID-19 has negatively impacted screening coverage rates with a reduction of patients invited for cancer screening. Screening services are now working above their usual capacity to deal with the backlog.
- Cervical cancer screening coverage has decreased in Merton since 2015 and is at 61.1% (25 - 49 year olds) and 70.3% (50 - 64 year olds) in 2021; below the London and England average and the NHS target of 80%.
- Breast cancer screening coverage decreased between 2020 and 2021 to 59.9%, below the NHS 'acceptable' target of 70% and achievable target of 80%. Breast cancer screening coverage in Merton is better than the London average but worse than England.
- Bowel cancer screening coverage increased from 58.2% in 2020 to 62.8% in 2021. This is above the London average but below the England average. This may be partly due to the introduction of the new home screening test kits.
- Flu vaccination in those aged over 65 increased significantly from 63% in 2019/20 to 71% in 2020/21 which is similar to the London average (71.8%) although this is still under the World Health Organisation (WHO) target of 75% and below the England average of 82%.

Disabilities

- People with disabilities face inequalities around the wider determinants of health, and barriers that can prevent them leading healthy lives, such as undertaking physical activity.

- There are 5,300 children and young people receiving Special Educational Needs (SEN) support in Merton for autism spectrum disease (ASD). Of these, 887 are receiving some SEN support while 1,763 have a full Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP). Some people with both a learning disability and a diagnosis of autism have high and complex support needs. Increasing complexity of need for this group has been highlighted by colleagues within the learning disability service in Merton.
- People with learning disabilities face significant health inequalities and are also at greater risk of dementia, mental health conditions and loneliness. The prevalence of learning disabilities on GP registers in South West London is 0.44%, or an estimated 930 people in Merton, probably an underestimate. This highlights the importance of annual health checks and health care passports as well as activities that support social connection.

Carers

- Over two thirds of Merton carers responding to a survey reported caring could be rewarding.
- Caring can impact our physical and mental health, with 70% of carers responding to the Merton survey reporting that caring had impacted their physical health and 67% stating caring had impacted their mental wellbeing.
- Carers may face additional barriers to accessing services and engaging in healthy lifestyles e.g. being physically active, which impacts their health and wellbeing.

Conclusions to inform priorities

- **Developing a whole system frailty pathway**
- **Supporting carers**
- **Greater awareness, greater provision of reasonable adjustments to improve access to health services and annual health checks for people with learning disabilities**
- **Autism support throughout the life-course, especially focusing on transition and highly complex adults with associated learning disabilities**
- **Better understanding of pattern of increasing complexity in health, care and welfare**