

# Joint area review

**London Borough of Merton Children's Services Authority  
Area**

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## Review of services for children and young people

Adult Learning Inspectorate  
Audit Commission  
Commission for Social Care Inspection  
Healthcare Commission  
HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate  
HM Inspectorate of Constabulary  
HM Inspectorate of Court Administration  
HM Inspectorate of Prisons  
HM Inspectorate of Probation  
Ofsted

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## Introduction

1. This joint area review was conducted using the arrangements required under section 20 of the Children Act 2004. It was carried out by a multi-disciplinary team of seven inspectors from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI), the Healthcare Commission (CHAI), the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) and the Audit Commission. The review was undertaken according to the requirements of the *Framework for the inspection of children's services*.

2. The review was linked to the contemporaneous corporate assessment of the local council by the Audit Commission and its findings are represented in the relevant part of the corporate assessment report.

3. This review describes the outcomes achieved by children and young people growing up in the Merton area and evaluates the way local services, taken together, contribute to their well-being. Joint area reviews focus on the extent to which children and young people are healthy, safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and are well prepared to secure economic well-being.

4. The review evaluates the collective contribution made to each outcome for children and young people by relevant services in the area. It also judges the contributions made by the council's services overall and, specifically, its education and children's social care services. Particular attention is given to joint action by local services on behalf of those groups of children and young people who are vulnerable to poor outcomes. Two such groups are covered in detail: children and young people who are looked after by the council, and children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

5. The review took place in two stages consisting in total of three weeks over a six-week period. The first stage reviewed all existing evidence including:

- self-assessment undertaken by local public service providers
- a survey of children and young people
- performance data
- the findings of the contemporaneous inspection of the youth service
- planning documents
- information from the inspection of local settings, such as schools and day-care provision
- evidence gathered during the earlier Youth Offending Team inspection
- briefings from staff within inspectorates, commissions and other public bodies in contact with local providers.

6. The second stage included inspection fieldwork. This included studies of how far local services have improved outcomes for a small sample of children and young people, some of whom have the most complex needs, and a study

of provision in the Mitcham area. It also included gathering evidence on 10 key judgements, selected because of their critical importance to improving outcomes for children and young people in the local area. This included discussions with elected members of the local authority and their equivalents in other public agencies, officers from these agencies, service users and community representatives. A review of case files for children and young people receiving support from a number of local agencies was also included.

## Context

7. Merton is a diverse outer London borough in the south west of London, with a population of 44,000 0–19 year olds. This figure is projected to rise to over 51,000 in the next 10 years. Deprivation rates in Merton are relatively low overall. However the needs of local children and young people are characterised by a marked contrast between the more affluent areas in the west of the borough, such as Wimbledon, and the more deprived areas in the east, particularly Mitcham. Average household income in east Merton is 23% lower than the borough average. Nearly a quarter of children and young people live in areas that are within the 30% most deprived in the country and 21% of Merton's children live in overcrowded housing.

8. There are 43 primary schools, eight secondary schools (including two new academies), three special schools and one pupil referral unit. Half of all children attending Merton schools are from black and minority ethnic groups. The largest single group is Black African (8.9%) with other significant groups being white other 7.6%, mixed background 7.5%, other Asian 7.0% and Black Caribbean 5.4%. The proportion of residents from black and minority ethnic backgrounds has grown over the last 10 years and is expected to continue to grow over the next 10, with a greater proportion living in the eastern wards. A third of Merton pupils have English as an additional language. In total, 135 languages are spoken by children and young people in Merton schools, with the highest numbers speaking Tamil and Urdu.

9. Approximately 90% of primary school children live in Merton compared with 75% in the secondary phase. At the end of the primary phase, approximately a third of pupils go to neighbouring boroughs for their education, many of whom are higher achievers. There are 99 children who are looked after; this figure has halved since 2002. The number of children on the child protection register is 129, and this has increased markedly. The number of children in receipt of social care casework stands at approximately 1,000.

10. The Merton Children's Trust oversees and monitors the implementation of the Children and Young People's Plan. This plan was developed collaboratively by all partners, and included extensive consultation with children and young people. It has developed partnership planning arrangements which are strongly rooted in the Local Strategic Partnership; the Partnership, the Children's Trust and its related sub-groups provide a solid basis for multi-agency working.

11. Merton has a diverse voluntary and community sector with about 160 active children, young people and family support groups. Representatives of the sector are fully engaged in the Merton Partnership, the Children's Trust, the development of the Local Area Agreement and in delivering services for children and young people. The Merton Compact is recognised as a model of good practice for agreements between the statutory and voluntary sectors and received a Gold commendation from the Home Office in 2005 and won the Municipal Journal Award in 2006. This underpins partnership working with the voluntary and community sector.

12. South London Learning and Skills Council (LSC) works closely with the local authority, Merton College, training providers and schools in delivering the 14–19 strategy. Post-16 education and training is provided by Merton College and a number other colleges in neighbouring boroughs. There are two school sixth forms and two work-based training providers. Entry to Employment provision is managed by Rathbone Training and Merton College. Adult and community learning, including family learning, is provided by the council.

13. Primary care for children in Merton is provided by the Sutton and Merton NHS Primary Care Trust (PCT). Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust is the main provider of acute health services. Other children's hospital services and accident and emergency services are provided by St George's Healthcare NHS Trust, which also provides services to Wandsworth and Sutton. Children's mental health services are provided by the South West London and St George's NHS Mental Health Trust. The trusts providing health services for the children of Merton fall within NHS London, the strategic health authority for London.

## Summary report

### Outcomes for children and young people

14. **Overall outcomes for children and young people in Merton are good, though in a minority of areas they are adequate.** Health outcomes are mostly good and indicators meet or exceed national and comparator group benchmarks. Teenage pregnancy rates are below the national rate and the lowest in outer London. For looked after children, health outcomes are good in comparison with other areas. Children and young people appear safe. The number of looked after children is low and they benefit from stable placements, support from qualified staff and timely reviews. Partners have been effective in improving pupils' behaviour in schools and in reducing the fear of crime and bullying.

15. Educational outcomes overall are adequate. In the Foundation Stage they are good. At primary schools, standards are broadly average but at Key Stage 4 they are below average. Children and young people have a good range of opportunities to make decisions and take personal responsibility and many make a good contribution to their communities. For looked after children

educational outcomes are comparatively good. Children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make adequate progress. Children and young people are adequately prepared for working life. GCSE pass rates are in line with the national average, however fewer young people than nationally achieve a level 2 or 3 qualification by age 19.

## The impact of local services

16. **The impact of local services in improving outcomes for children and young people is good.** Over recent years, partners have improved services, some dramatically, through sound strategies implemented by good quality managers and front line staff. The council and its partners have high aspirations for children and young people in the borough. They provide effective leadership in developing services and have a very good understanding of local needs. There is a strong focus on reducing inequalities and ensuring that all children and young people achieve their potential. Partners know where improvements are needed and their track record demonstrates that they have good capacity to secure further improvements for children and young people in Merton.

17. Health inequalities are being addressed effectively by good partnership working. Good progress has been made in reducing teenage pregnancy and supporting those children and young people with mental health problems. The safety of the most vulnerable children is given appropriately high priority and they are effectively supported through thorough assessments and interventions. There is a good focus on the safety of children and young people in the community. Effective action has ensured that educational standards are improving. Children and young people are effectively supported to 'have their say' on matters that concern them and in the development of local services. They are adequately supported to prepare for work.

## Being healthy

18. **The impact of all local services in securing the health of children and young people is good.** Parents and carers receive good support to keep their children healthy. Health inequalities are identified and addressed well through partnership working. Maternity and antenatal services are generally good. Healthy lifestyles are promoted well, particularly through healthy eating and sports initiatives. An effective teenage pregnancy strategy and a well implemented action plan have resulted in the lowest teenage pregnancy rates in outer London. Children and young people's physical health is good overall and they receive timely and appropriate access to health services. Most children and young people with mental health problems receive good multi-agency services and support, although there is a low take-up of child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) by children and young people from black and minority ethnic groups. The health needs of looked after children are addressed effectively. Most children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have appropriate access to good specialist health services, except for

non urgent occupational therapy where waiting times are too long. Transition planning for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is not co-ordinated effectively between all agencies and some young people with complex needs are not adequately prepared and supported for the move to adult health services.

## Staying safe

19. **The impact of all local services in keeping children and young people safe is good.** A well-established Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) promotes the wider safeguarding agenda well, while retaining a clear focus on the core business of child protection. Partners contribute funding appropriately and are well represented on the board. The training provided through the LSCB is well attended and well received. Sound recruitment checks are in place. Children and young people at risk are well protected by secure, timely and well-managed arrangements to assess and respond promptly to referrals.

20. Targeted action by the council has improved social work recruitment and retention to an acceptable level with further investment and plans agreed. Rigorous induction, supervision, auditing and performance management systems support social workers and drive improvement. A strong and established focus on family support continues to ensure that appropriately low numbers of children become looked after. The implementation of the child concern model has successfully engaged a wide range of staff across the different agencies, and resulted in more prompt and effective services for children in need. Looked after children are very well supported and many achieve better outcomes than those in similar authorities and against national averages. Many children with disabilities receive a range of support services, although the council recognises that some of these need developing to better meet demand. The council and its partners work effectively to provide safe environments for children, and most children and young people report that they feel safe. Good arrangements are in place to identify and track missing children.

## Enjoying and achieving

21. **The impact of all local services in helping children and young people to enjoy their education and recreation and to achieve well is good.** Parents and carers receive good support on educational matters. Very good early years provision promotes children's development and well-being and helps them to meet early learning goals well. Good action ensures educational provision 5–16 is improving but this has not yet raised standards sufficiently in secondary schools. Good support encourages children and young people to attend school and to achieve highly, but some schools do not include those with behavioural problems well enough. In secondary schools, a disproportionate number of pupils excluded for poor behaviour are from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. The under-reporting of racist incidents in schools is being



addressed well. Good educational provision is made for children and young people who do not attend school.

22. Most children and young people can access a good range of high quality, popular recreational facilities, activities and events, although some teenagers report a lack of activities for their age range. Opportunities for extracurricular activities in schools are good. Very good partnerships have significantly increased provision for sport. Children and young people who are looked after receive good help to enjoy and achieve; improving their educational achievement is a high priority and celebrated well. For children and young people with disabilities, a suitable range of provision contributes to inclusion well. They receive good help; however, a review of provision to reduce reliance on expensive out-of-borough placements has taken too long. Statements are of satisfactory quality, but, in some, the entitlement to additional support is not specified sufficiently clearly.

### **Making a positive contribution**

23. **The impact of all local services in helping children and young people to contribute to society is good.** Children and young people are well supported in developing socially and emotionally. There is good awareness of the importance of developing their confidence, self-esteem and social skills to enable them to achieve their full potential. Most have access to good help and guidance when they need it. There is a wide range of forums and other means through which children and young people can express their opinions and be involved in planning and evaluating services. Good progress has already been made in establishing such ways of working as 'standard' across a wide range of local services. A particular strength is the guidance and support provided to young people to enable them to make an effective contribution when participating in such activities. This includes children and young people who are looked after and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

24. There is a good range of activities aimed at reducing antisocial behaviour and diverting young people from offending. These activities are planned and delivered in a well-targeted and well-coordinated way. Information gathering and sharing between different agencies is particularly effective. There is a clear and appropriate focus on gang activity; the range of approaches to this problem, and to preventative and intervention work more generally, is good. It recognises that flexible and timely packages, targeted at individuals and local areas, have the best chance of success. The deployment of police officers in secondary schools is a real strength.

### **Achieving economic well-being**

25. **The impact of all local services in helping children and young people achieve economic well-being is adequate.** Parents and carers have access to a good range of childcare places and the council is effective in targeting growth to areas of greatest need. Families are helped to secure the benefits to which they are entitled and the council works well with voluntary

organisations to support families in need. Support provided by Connexions personal advisers is effective in promoting young people's progression to education, training or employment. Most young people receive appropriate careers advice and guidance but some reported limited opportunities for one-to-one discussions with personal advisers. A high proportion of young people leave the borough at age 16 and the council and the local LSC have yet to establish an appropriate configuration of institutions to provide post-16 education. The work of the 14–19 partnership is improving opportunities for young people in this age group to follow appropriate courses, but they do not have equality of access to provision across the borough.

26. Looked after children are supported well and a significant number progress to higher education. Progression of young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to education, training and employment is adequate. Although the provision is improving, there are insufficient opportunities available locally for those with more complex needs. The council has ambitious plans for regenerating the more deprived parts of the borough, although much remains to be done. There is not enough social housing in the borough that is suitable for families.

### **Service management**

27. **The management of services for children and young people is good.** Elected members and senior officers have a very good understanding of the needs of the children and young people in Merton. They approach the children's services agenda in a purposeful manner. The ambitions for children and young people are good. These are clear and there is a strong commitment from all partners to further integrate and improve outcomes. Ambitions have been successfully translated into clear priorities that are shared by partners and stakeholders. Prioritisation is good. Through the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership, there are suitably ambitious and challenging plans to improve outcomes for children and young people and continue to develop partnership working. The priorities are given high prominence within the high level strategies, and funding is being targeted at priority services. Needs assessment is good and is used well to target provision appropriately. There is a clear understanding of changing and emerging needs, and a good balance between national and local priorities. There is a strong focus on reducing inequalities and improving outcomes for vulnerable groups.

28. Merton has good capacity to deliver services, building on good examples of partnership working and a sound track record of improving underperforming services. The council is building additional capacity effectively to meet the children and young people's agenda. Financial management is good and a number of services for children and young people provide good value for money. Arrangements for service commissioning and workforce planning are at an early and transitional stage, but are being effectively developed to meet new demands. Performance management is good. There are well-established performance management systems and processes within social care and

education services and there is a good understanding of performance management throughout children's services. The findings of this review are largely consistent with the judgements made by the council and its partners in the self-assessment. The capacity to improve further is good.

## Grades

Grades awarded:

4: outstanding; 3: good; 2: adequate; 1: inadequate

	Local services overall	Council services	Health services
Being healthy	3		
Staying safe	3		
Enjoying and achieving	3		
Making a positive contribution	3		
Achieving economic well-being	2		
Service management	3		
Capacity to improve	3	3	
Children's services		3	
The education service		3	
The social care services for children		3	
The health service for children			3

## Recommendations

### For action over the next six months

The council and partners should:

- improve provision for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities by:
  - developing and implementing an effective strategic approach
  - implementing a review of the provision
  - implementing effective transition arrangements from child to adult health services
- improve outcomes for black and minority ethnic groups by increasing access to CAMHS and reducing the proportion excluded from school.

### For action in the longer term

The council and partners should:

- raise standards in 14–19 education.

## Main report

### Outcomes for children and young people

**29. Outcomes for children and young people in Merton are good overall, although educational outcomes are adequate.**

**30. Health outcomes for children and young people in Merton are good overall.** Most health outcomes meet or exceed national and comparator group benchmarks. A significantly low proportion of expectant mothers smoke in pregnancy and the number who start breastfeeding their babies is higher than in comparable areas. There has been good improvement in immunisation rates for children at their second birthday, which now meet local comparator rates, but immunisation at five years is still below that of comparable areas. Infant and child death rates are at national levels although both show an upward trend from a previously low rate. The teenage pregnancy rate is reducing at a higher rate than the national average. It is now below national rates and the lowest in outer London. The dental health of children and young people is variable, with outcomes for five year olds significantly better than the national average and those for 14 year olds significantly below national rates. Waiting times for CAMHS have improved to meet national targets and are now satisfactory. Health outcomes for looked after children are good. Health

assessments are timely and those placed out of borough receive good access to health services. There has been a good increase locally in the take-up of healthy school meals.

**31. Children and young people appear to be safe.** Most performance indicators are above or in line with similar authorities and national averages. All children on the child protection register and those looked after are allocated to qualified staff and reviews are held within the required timescales. The number of looked after children remains consistently low. Most outcomes for this group are good, either better than similar authorities and national averages or in line with them. The proportion of those who are looked after by family and friends and in family placements is slightly better than in similar authorities. More young people who are looked after remain with the same carers and have fewer moves than elsewhere. The proportion of children who are adopted is good. The number of children on the child protection register has been lower than that of similar authorities and re-registrations were half in comparison. However, both are now rising. Effective work by partners has improved behaviour in schools and reduced the fear of crime and bullying in schools and local areas.

**32. Educational outcomes are adequate overall.** Outcomes are good in the Foundation Stage. Standards and progress in primary schools are broadly at national averages, having risen sharply at Key Stage 2. Results at Key Stages 3 and 4 are improving but standards are below national averages overall and pupils make below average progress, although in English and mathematics improvement is above the national trend. For looked after children outcomes are relatively good compared to those achieved nationally. Attendance in schools is now broadly average and unauthorised absence has fallen to below average, having reduced significantly in secondary schools. In primary schools, permanent exclusions are comparatively low. Fixed-term exclusions are in line with the national average and well below similar authorities. In the secondary sector, permanent exclusions have halved and are now broadly average. Fixed-term exclusions have fallen, but remain well above the national average and that of similar authorities. A disproportionate number of pupils excluded for poor behaviour are from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. Most children and young people are involved in activities in school or in their local area. Almost all looked after children take part in at least one organised activity each week. The progress of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is adequate.

**33. Children and young people have a good range of opportunities to make decisions and take personal responsibility and many make a good contribution to their communities.** They feel positive about both their opportunities to 'have their say' and the way their views are listened to. They have influenced the development and delivery of services in a number of ways. Representation on consultative groups, both at individual service and cross-borough level, comes from a good cross-section of the community. The proportion of looked after children and children and young people with learning

difficulties and/or disabilities contributing to their case reviews is comparatively high. Many young people are involved in voluntary activities. Levels of antisocial behaviour and low-level crime have been reduced. However, there has been no recent reduction in the number of first-time entrants to the youth justice system. Re-offending by established young offenders, whilst below that in similar areas, has increased slightly. The proportion of young offenders participating in education, training and employment is comparatively high.

**34. Children and young people are adequately prepared for working life.** GCE A level pass rates are in line with the national average. However, fewer young people than nationally achieve a level 2 or 3 qualification by the age of 19. The proportion of 16 and 17 year olds who are not in education, employment or training is in line with the national average. Young people following level 3 programmes make just above average progress overall, and progress is very good at the two schools with sixth forms. Success rates for 16–18 year olds following full-time courses at Merton College are well below the average for similar colleges. At entry and level 1, however, success rates are in line with similar colleges. Outcomes for young people following Entry to Employment programmes and success rates for apprenticeships are good. The proportion of care leavers progressing into education, employment or training is below the national rate, although a higher than average proportion continue in higher education. A good proportion of teenage mothers enter education, employment or training compared to the national average. A fifth of children live in overcrowded accommodation.

## The impact of local services

### Being healthy

**35. The work of all local services in securing the health of children and young people is good.** Parents and carers receive good support to keep their children healthy. Health inequalities are effectively identified and addressed through good partnership working. Maternity and antenatal services are generally good, with effective breastfeeding support and good services to help expectant and new mothers to stop smoking.

36. Good health visiting and school nursing, in partnership with voluntary sector organisations, provide well-targeted services for more vulnerable children and families. Services are increasingly delivered through schools and children's centres. This successfully engages more excluded groups, such as teenage mothers and newly arrived families from the Tamil community. Recent changes in the health visiting service to better target support to families are not yet clear to some new parents. A well-considered review is planned to ensure that the redesigned service is effectively promoted and meets all families' needs.

37. Healthy lifestyles are promoted well for children and young people. Good school and community-based health promotion programmes, particularly for healthy eating and sports, are effectively targeted to areas of deprivation. The introduction of healthier school meals has resulted in a good increase in uptake

by pupils. A comparatively high number of schools participate in the Healthy Schools programme and in Merton's very good Schools Sports Partnership programme. An effective teenage pregnancy strategy and a well-implemented action plan have resulted in a significant reduction in the number of teenage conceptions. Merton now has the lowest teenage pregnancy rate in outer London.

38. Children and young people's physical health is good overall and they receive timely and appropriate access to health services. The work of the specialist education welfare nurse is highly regarded and has contributed to significantly improved health and education outcomes for a number of vulnerable children. Access to substance misuse services for young people is generally good. Services are now being appropriately refocused on reducing alcohol and tobacco use amongst young people. There are some very good examples of individual health and emotional support provided for obese children. There is a well-conceived strategy to tackle childhood obesity; however, the strategy is not yet implemented and actions are not effectively coordinated across all settings.

39. Most children and young people with mental health problems receive good multi-agency services and support. CAMHS is much improved and waiting times for assessment have significantly improved and now meet national targets. However, there is a lack of provision and comparatively low take-up of CAMHS by children and young people from black and minority ethnic groups. There are some good examples of innovative service user consultation, such as work with Tamil families, to improve access to services. Statutory and voluntary agencies, such as Phoenix and Jigsaw4U, work well together to provide early intervention services. Children and young people with severe or urgent mental health needs receive very good in-patient and home-based interventions. Staff working with children receive a good level of advice and supervision to identify and manage children's mental health problems.

40. Looked after children's health needs are addressed effectively. Individualised health care plans identify needs well and are successfully implemented and reviewed. Children placed outside of the borough receive good access to health services. The looked after children's nurse provides accessible health promotion information and advice to children and their carers. CAMHS provides a very good multi-agency and non-stigmatising service that engages those who are looked after well. Foster carers are also well supported by CAMHS, and this contributes significantly to placement stability.

41. Most children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have timely access to good specialist health services. However, waiting times are too long for non-urgent occupational therapy in line with the situation nationally. Older children with newly diagnosed Asperger's syndrome are not able to access some specialist services, such as speech and language therapy. Access to CAMHS is adequate and improving. Good multi-agency emotional and behavioural support packages are provided for most children with autistic

spectrum disorders. Families and pre-school children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities or complex needs receive very good support from the portage service and the early years link worker service, although there is less support provided for school-aged children. Transition planning for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is not co-ordinated effectively between all agencies and some young people with complex needs are not adequately prepared and supported for the move to adult health services. Partners recognise the need to improve the integration of services and have appropriately prioritised the development of services for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and their families.

## **Staying safe**

42. **The work of all local services in keeping children and young people safe is good.** A well-established LSCB promotes the wider safeguarding agenda well, and maintains a clear focus on the core business of child protection. Partners contribute funding appropriately and are well represented on the board; work has been completed to expand the engagement of the voluntary sector. The training provided through the LSCB is well attended and well received. Appropriate protocols are in place and are widely understood. Good formal and informal liaison and networking arrangements ensure effective collaboration between the agencies. Extensive, well-focused and prompt advice, training and support are provided to carers and staff in statutory and private settings. Processes for Criminal Records Bureau and other vetting checks in statutory and voluntary agencies are sound. Multi-agency public protection arrangements are in place and used appropriately.

43. Children and young people at risk are effectively protected by secure and well-managed arrangements to assess and respond promptly to referrals. Social workers receive good support and regular supervision. A thorough induction is provided for new social workers. A variety of training opportunities are regularly provided and the take-up of these is good. Regular lunchtime practice seminars help drive improvements. Senior managers in children's services are accessible and supportive.

44. Effective action, including a recruitment drive abroad, has significantly improved the recruitment and retention of social care staff. The supportive and positive working environment has encouraged a number of agency staff to apply successfully for permanent posts. A further recruitment drive and significant additional funding to increase social work salaries have been agreed to reinforce this progress. As a result the dependency on agency staff has been significantly reduced. Good outcomes for children have been maintained while this work has been underway. Social workers have manageable caseloads and all children on the child protection register and those looked after are allocated to qualified staff. A child in need meeting is held for all those who are taken off the child protection register to ensure their needs continue to be met.



45. There is good multi-agency working and recording. Case transfer arrangements between social work teams work well. Service managers undertake regular audits of individual case files and written feedback from these audits are used by team managers to maintain and improve the quality of practice. Performance management information is used effectively to improve services.

46. A carefully phased introduction of the child concern model began in 2004. An effective multi-agency training programme has led to early intervention for children in need, and a better common understanding of thresholds for referrals to social care. Staff in different agencies, particularly in schools, are now able to initiate assessments, complete the referral form and, where necessary, convene a child in need meeting. Additional social work posts have been established in two of the five school clusters to respond to the increased workload. The process is engaging families more effectively in assessments and provides a ready mechanism to better incorporate the needs of siblings and the family overall. Partners recognise that, while there has been significant progress in implementing the model to date, further work is needed before it is a comprehensive and fully embedded system.

47. The number of referrals to social care is rising, as are the number of children on the child protection register and the rate of re-registration. Social care services and the LSCB closely monitor and analyse these changes, which are mainly due to the introduction of the child concern model and to demographic changes in one part of the borough.

48. Sound arrangements are in place to establish the whereabouts of all children. Procedures are well established for identifying and tracking children missing from education and care. There is good communication between Merton and other London boroughs about families who give cause for concern and move between boroughs.

49. A good range of information in different languages is provided to families to support their parenting role, and to children and young people about keeping themselves safe. Schools promote safeguarding well. Work to provide safe environments is effective. Contracted services are required to comply with safe recruitment practices. Road safety initiatives are effective in reducing accidents and the Education Welfare Service actively monitors child employment arrangements. Most young people said they feel very or quite safe at school and in the area around their school, although there are geographical variations and some are concerned about racism, or unhappy about graffiti and the quality of their surroundings. All schools have a named Safer Neighbourhoods Officer, and six secondary schools have a police officer on site which young people find reassuring. This has contributed to improved behaviour within schools and local areas and the reduction of fear of crime and bullying.

50. The area has responded well to the issue of domestic violence. Regular liaison between the social care managers and the Child Abuse Investigation Team ensures that there is a common understanding of thresholds and that appropriate referrals keep children safe. The family support team offers an outreach service to families after police have attended incidents. Partners have rightly recognised the need for more early intervention services and have established a pilot scheme to work with children affected by domestic violence.

51. The council and its partners have a long-established and successful focus on family support and preventive services. This ensures low and appropriate numbers of looked after children with good adoption rates. A good proportion of children and young people are fostered, placed for adoption or placed with relatives and friends. More remain with the same carers and have fewer moves than elsewhere. Collaborative work by the co-located looked after children education and health teams support children, carers and staff particularly well. An exceptionally high rate of placement stability is achieved and outcomes for looked after children are good. A recent inspection of the fostering service judged it to be good.

52. Services for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in social care are adequate. The Children with Disabilities Team in social care accepts referrals of cases of children and young people with the most profound and/or complex needs. Other social care cases are held by the children in need and the looked after teams, who receive advice and support from the specialist team. Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have good individual care plans. Six hundred children are currently on the disability register and access to direct payments is progressing well. Children access short-term residential breaks and community services such as holiday play schemes, and children with complex medical needs receive respite placements in hospitals. However, provision does not always meet demand. The council and partners have rightly identified the need for a comprehensive analysis of the needs of children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and a multi-agency strategy.

### **Enjoying and achieving**

53. **The work of all local services in helping children and young people to enjoy their education and recreation and to achieve well is good.** Parents and carers receive good support in helping their children to enjoy and achieve. The Children's Information Service is effective in directing adults and children to suitable support. Very good early years provision promotes children's development and well-being and helps them to meet early learning goals well. Providers are monitored, challenged and supported very well to improve the quality of their provision and good multi-agency collaboration ensures services are responsive to the needs of vulnerable families.

54. Good action ensures educational provision 5–16 is improving. Support in primary schools has contributed well to the steep rise in standards at Key Stage 2; these are now broadly comparable with national averages. In the secondary phase, well thought through and targeted action has not yet impacted sufficiently on standards where pupils make below average progress. Good use of highly comprehensive data, good support from the national strategies teams and a good focus on leadership had been particularly effective in redressing inequalities and improving achievement. Two poorly performing secondary schools have recently re-opened as academies, ahead of schedule. Pupils report many improvements in learning.

55. Strengthened procedures for challenge to, and support for, schools have resulted in a reduced number causing concern locally. Collaborative work between schools, good support for self-evaluation and very good support for governing bodies is improving provision further. School improvement partners and effective links with other authorities have increased capacity to raise standards and to disseminate best practice. Effective action is underway in secondary schools to address the underperformance of black and minority ethnic groups and is resulting in improved attitudes to learning. There is very good support for pupils from Traveller backgrounds. Provision for learners of English as an additional language is insufficient to meet need in some schools.

56. Good support encourages children and young people to attend school and achieve highly, but some schools do not include those with behavioural problems well enough. School places are suitable and accessible, with looked after children given first priority in oversubscribed schools. Support for attendance is good. Resources have been targeted well and regular truancy patrols are effective as deterrents. The Young Carers Project successfully supports regular attendance. Behaviour is good in primary schools and satisfactory in secondary schools: here, a disproportionate number of pupils excluded for poor behaviour are from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. For young people permanently excluded, good inter-agency work minimises the time spent out of school. Schools do not fully report racist incidents, but this is being addressed well through improved procedures and well-targeted work.

57. Good educational provision is made for children and young people who do not attend school. Robust monitoring and good support for children of school age educated at home assures suitable provision. For permanently-excluded pupils, placements are well considered, well monitored, and reviewed regularly. Their return to school is generally timely.

58. The SMART centre pupil referral unit has recovered well following a notice to improve from Ofsted. Referral procedures are clear and placements are carefully considered. Pupils make satisfactory progress, and, for many, attendance is significantly improved. The centre has a good track record of reintegration, although pupils with statements of special educational need sometimes stay too long pending permanent placements. For those remaining on roll, GCSE results have improved, and in 2006 all but one pupil continued in

learning. Suitable alternative education for newly arrived asylum-seeking pupils in Year 11 is resulting in good gains in learning.

59. Most children and young people have access to a good range of high quality, popular recreational facilities and activities, including during school holidays. Provision includes many parks and open spaces, well-equipped play areas, very high quality sports facilities, and a wide range of arts, theatre, drama and music activities. A large number of activities are provided free of charge. Holiday provision is heavily subsidised and transport is free for all learners up to the age of 18. Opportunities for extracurricular activities in schools are good, as is the very wide range of activities provided by extended schools. Very good partnerships have significantly increased provision for sport. Playing for Success initiatives combine education and sport very well for young people who are at risk of underachievement. The number of young people served by, and gaining accreditation through, the youth service has improved. Work is in hand to extend the range of provision further. Additionally the voluntary and community sector provides successful targeted and preventative projects for minority and vulnerable groups. The recruitment of the consultation and communications officer by the council responds to concerns expressed by some teenagers over a lack of facilities for their age range.

60. Children and young people who are looked after receive good help to enjoy and achieve. Improving their educational achievement is given high priority, closely monitored by elected members, and celebrated well. A good range of provision includes good multi-agency support, effective additional tuition and a highly accessible website offering very useful advice on educational matters. Designated teachers in schools are supported well. Guidance for the completion of personal education plans is comprehensive, but not all such plans meet the authority's exacting standards.

61. Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities receive good help to enjoy and achieve. Good training and support for schools, good outreach work, and good support for young children with complex needs increasingly enables early assessment and appropriate intervention. Statements of special educational need are of satisfactory quality and suitably involve pupils and parents, but some do not clearly define entitlement to additional support. Placements are carefully managed and statements are reviewed regularly to ensure provision continues to meet need. While reliance on statements is successfully reducing, the authority ensures the needs of young people remain well met through monitoring the impact of provision. A review of provision to reduce reliance on expensive out-of-borough placements has taken too long. Additional funding has been delegated to schools but some are struggling to meet the costs of extra provision and funding is low for pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties. For young people with disabilities, a range of clubs, specially equipped playgrounds and opportunities for sport meet their leisure and recreation needs. The Parent Partnership is good and parents express a high level of confidence in the service. The authority's website meets requirements, but information is not easily accessible.

## **Making a positive contribution**

62. **The work of all local services in helping children and young people to contribute to society is good.** Children and young people are well supported in developing socially and emotionally. Many services make a good contribution in such respects, either as a primary purpose of their work or as an important component of it. For example, a comparatively high proportion of primary schools are involved in the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning programme and this is having a positive impact. Similarly, at 'the Hub' young people have access to good mentoring support which helps develop their self-confidence and ability to build positive relationships with their peers and others. Overall there is a good awareness of the importance of developing children and young people's confidence, self-esteem and social skills if they are to achieve their full potential. Good support is also provided to parents who are having difficulties in maintaining positive relationships with their children.

63. Support for young people in managing change and responding to challenges and difficult periods in their lives is good and this is particularly so for vulnerable groups. Again, a wide range of services and activities make a significant contribution to this. For example, Connexions personal advisers successfully support many vulnerable young people, and particularly those at high risk of not entering employment, education or training, in making key decisions. Similarly, youth workers are a source of highly valued personal support for some young people at key moments of need. Overall, a high proportion of children and young people report that they have at least one adult, apart from their parents and other family members, to whom they can go with confidence for advice and support if they feel troubled.

64. There is a wide range of forums and other means through which children and young people can express their opinions and be involved in planning and evaluating services. Good progress has already been made in establishing such ways of working as 'standard' across a wide range of local services. Compared to elsewhere, young people feel positive about both their opportunities to 'have their say' and the way their views are listened to. This applies both to individual services, such as schools and youth centres, and to provision and issues affecting the whole borough. There are a number of examples of how children and young people have been influential in the improvement of services. Young people are routinely involved in the recruitment of staff across agencies, the quality of local parks has improved as a result of their views, and provision has been extended at the Lavender Children's Centre through their efforts. A particular strength is the guidance and support provided to young people to enable them to make an effective contribution when participating in such activities. This is so both for individual young people when they participate in the planning and review of the provision made for them and for those involved in consultative forums and other group activities. One consequence of this is that participation is reasonably representative of the wider community, in terms of gender, ethnic group, family background and the like. The deployment of Youth Opportunities Fund money through a panel of young people considering

bids prepared by other young people is a particularly good example of how young people's participation benefits all those involved. These benefits include increased self-confidence and self-esteem as well as new knowledge and skills. Good support and encouragement is also given to young people to engage in voluntary activity to support the community.

65. There is a good range of activities aimed at reducing antisocial behaviour and diverting young people from offending. These activities are planned and delivered in a well-targeted and well-coordinated way. Arrangements for gathering and sharing information between the various agencies involved are particularly effective. There is a clear and appropriate focus on gang activity, with good links between the relevant public agencies, both locally and across London. The range of approaches to this problem, and to preventative and intervention work more generally, is good. It recognises that flexible packages, targeted at individuals and local areas have the best chance of success. There is clear evidence that both young people and parents and carers value the support provided, and levels of antisocial behaviour and low-level crime have been reduced. The deployment of police officers in secondary schools is a real strength. It contributes both to the improvement of behaviour within schools and local areas and to reducing the fear of crime and bullying for young people. The prompt response by the local authority to graffiti and vandalism in the wider community also helps in addressing such fear.

66. Work with young offenders is good overall, and the recidivism rate is below that of areas with similar population characteristics. Whilst the trend is gradually upwards and the gap with the similar area average is narrowing, the rise of gang activity is a key underlying factor. This is proving a major challenge to all the areas most affected and is not of the same significance elsewhere. Whilst there have been problems in the past, current performance in delivering CAMHS and substance abuse support for young offenders is good. The participation of young offenders in employment, education and training is also comparatively high. Multi-agency collaboration generally is good, as is restorative justice work which has improved significantly over the last three years.

67. There are good opportunities for children and young people who are looked after to express their views, both about the provision made for them individually and more generally. They are well supported in this by the Listening to Children Officer. The proportion of young people contributing to their case reviews has improved and is now comparatively very high. The Looked After Children's Forum meets regularly and its members, as well as giving views on provision, are actively involved in both service development and management. Examples include the development of a guide for care leavers on the financial support available to them and their involvement in the recruitment of staff. The percentage of looked after children who are young offenders is in line with the national average, though there has been a steady increase over time.

68. Young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are suitably supported in contributing to case reviews and the rate of participation is comparatively high. They are also appropriately included in broader consultation exercises, such as the development of the Children and Young People's Plan, and are well represented on the borough's youth forum. They are provided with good support to help them contribute effectively in such activities.

### **Achieving economic well-being**

69. **The work of all local services in helping children and young people achieve economic well-being is adequate.** There is a good range of childcare places provided in areas of greatest need and parents and carers have good access to information about the provision available. Support for families to secure benefits is good and there is good collaborative working with the voluntary sector to provide practical advice and support for families in need. Parents and carers have good access to family learning and community-based adult education classes which are improving their prospects of securing employment.

70. During Key Stage 4, all pupils undertake meaningful work experience which enhances their understanding of the world of work. Young people have appropriate access to careers education and guidance but some reported only limited opportunities for one-to-one discussions with Connexions personal advisers. Groups of young people at risk of not progressing to education, employment and training at age 16 are identified early through good collaborative activity and supported well by Connexions personal advisers. Good progress has been made in reducing the proportion of young people whose destinations are not known. The overall proportion of young people who are not in education, employment or training at age 16 has decreased and is in line with the national average. The range of provision for groups who are at risk of not continuing in education, employment or training is improving. Young people are encouraged to make best use of the benefits to which they are entitled and the uptake of education maintenance allowances is good.

71. The local authority and the local LSC have started to tackle weaknesses in the range of provision and outcomes for 14–19 year olds but they have yet to agree the best configuration of institutions for delivering post-16 provision. The local LSC has restructured its management and is now better able to focus on the specific needs of learners across the borough. A 14–19 partnership has been established by the local authority and a strategy developed which reflects local priorities. Although it is in the early stages of implementation, it is beginning to have an impact. Outcomes across education and training providers are now monitored more rigorously and the range of vocational options available to young people is improving. There is a clear focus on improving outcomes for vulnerable and underachieving groups. An adequate range of entry level courses are offered by schools and Merton College and there are limited, although improving, options for 14–16 year olds to follow vocational programmes at level 2. Establishing a range of new diplomas and ensuring

equality of access to an appropriate range of provision has been correctly identified as a strategic priority.

72. The local authority has established an overarching community regeneration strategy and has ambitious plans for regenerating the town centre of Mitcham. Analyses of needs have been completed for the more deprived areas in the east of the borough with the aim of narrowing the gap between these and the more prosperous wards in the west. The needs of children and young people are regarded as priorities. Local residents, including children and young people, have been involved in developing local action plans. The impact of regeneration can be clearly seen in the Pollards Hill area, where there has been extensive building and development, but is more modest in other areas with significant deprivation.

73. The council is successful in minimising the use of temporary accommodation for families and has improved the quality of temporary housing. Young mothers are provided with good advice and support to secure housing within a reasonable period of time. Supported accommodation is provided for young mothers who are unable to live independently. Emergency accommodation for homeless young people is adequate and the council is very mindful of the need to ensure vulnerable, homeless young people are safe. There is not enough social housing in the borough which is suitable for families. The council is currently exploring options for the future of its housing stock to ensure that the decent home standards will be met by 2010.

74. Young people who are looked after by the council have pathway plans and are provided with good, comprehensive support covering both their personal and academic needs. Progression to education, training or employment at age 16 is improving but continues to be below the national average. Nevertheless, of those young people who continue in education and training, a good proportion progress successfully to higher education. Connexions personal advisers help with their self-confidence and self-esteem and the local authority ensures they present themselves well at interviews by providing clothing allowances. Housing and benefits officers are involved in planning for independent living at an early stage and arrangements for housing young people leaving care are good. Options range from continuation of foster care placements for those in higher education to independent living in council accommodation. Young people are provided with good support to help them develop independent living skills. Despite the information and support available however, young people are often confused about their rights and which benefits they are entitled to.

75. Clear structures have been established for transition planning for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and four specialist personal advisers provide targeted support for young people with complex needs. Partners have correctly recognised that the Transition Partnership Board is not yet fully effective and are developing its role. Although annual reviews of statements are conducted within statutory timescales and a transition review is



completed for all Year 9 pupils, attendance at reviews by key professional staff is inconsistent. Recommendations are not always implemented with sufficient urgency to achieve the outcomes intended for these young people. Decision making and the allocation of resources by different partners is not well aligned. Multi-agency financial decision making is at an early stage of development. Overall, the progression of young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to education, employment or training is adequate. The provision for those with moderate learning difficulties and/or disabilities has improved but the local authority and its partners have correctly identified the need to develop more coherent progression opportunities across the area. Welfare support provided by statutory and voluntary services is generally good and the take up of direct payments is improving.

### **Service management**

**76. The management of services for children and young people is good.** The ambitions of the council and its partners for children and young people are good; they are both challenging and realistic. Effective strategic leadership is being provided by the council and partners. They have a very good understanding of the needs of children and young people in Merton and approach the children's services agenda in a purposeful manner. Good working relationships have been established between strategic partners. There is wide representation from partner organisations on the Children's Strategic Partnership and they are working actively to ensure the success of new structures and governance arrangements. Partners demonstrate strong ambitions, reflected in high aspirations for children's services, including a clear intention to improve outcomes and to further integrate services for all children and young people.

**77.** The Children and Young People's Plan outlines a clearly stated and challenging agenda to improve outcomes for children and young people. The plan is based on a very good understanding of local needs and is informed by the views of parents, children and young people. Targets are effectively linked and aligned between the key strategic plans in the area. Each plan has a set of appropriate actions with strategic responsibility for delivering each of the outcome areas clearly laid out.

**78.** The council with its partners already has a number of well-established integrated services. The partnership is making good progress in the development of extended schools and reasonable progress on the roll out of children's centres. Partners have the appropriate processes in place for translating shared ambitions into action. Medium term financial planning is robust.

**79.** Prioritisation of the needs of children and young people is good. There has been close involvement of all stakeholders, including children and young people, in developing the priorities which are given appropriately high prominence within plans. There is a strong commitment by partners to

children's services. The local authority is committed to directing resources to deliver these priorities and is targeting £1.1 million in 2007–08 for developing Children's Trust arrangements, the youth service, improving standards in secondary schools and improving the recruitment and retention of staff in social care. There is a clear understanding of changing and emerging needs and the priorities reflect a good balance between national and local priorities.

80. Merton's approach to diversity and inclusion is good. The council celebrates diversity and has a clear focus on disadvantaged areas and underachieving groups. The success of Merton's approach is manifested, for example, by comparatively good outcomes for looked after children and successfully getting vulnerable groups into education, training and employment. The local authority has acted speedily and effectively to improve outcomes for young people in the east of the borough with the fast tracking of two of the poorest performing schools to open as academies from September 2006. The record of the partners on the delivery of improved outcomes is good. For example, the work to reduce under 16 year old teenage conception in girls under 16 has resulted in significant reductions, and the effective introduction of healthy school meals has resulted in a 15% increase in uptake by pupils.

81. The capacity of the council and its partners is good. The portfolio holders for children's services, the Chief Executive, the Director of Children's Services and the directorate management team, provide strong and focused leadership. Members and officers are clear about their different roles and responsibilities and how they can best drive improvement in Merton. The establishment of a new senior management team is providing effective management of change and frontline staff share their agenda. The council is further building its capacity to meet the children's agenda, in particular by increasing project management capacity to drive through the changes and by using specialist support from external consultants on major projects and reviews, for example the special educational needs placement review. The Child Concern model has been successfully introduced across agencies and is resulting in increased referral of children and young people in need to social care. There is a sound track record of improving underperforming services.

82. The partnership has been slow in developing formal workforce planning arrangements. The children's workforce development group has started to map existing resources, but the council has still to formulate joint strategies with partners over the medium to long term to systematically overcome future staff and skills shortages. The council has adopted a range of effective actions in order to tackle the retention and recruitment of social workers and teachers, including robust supervisory, quality assurance and support mechanisms. The council has also committed £700k over the next three years to improve pay for social workers. The arrangements for safe recruitment practice are good.

83. The commissioning of children and young people's services is developing and is linked effectively to the key priorities of the Children and Young People's Plan. There are examples where commissioning is in place through CAMHS, but

this is still in its infancy. The partnership acknowledges this and commissioning is one of the core activities of the Children's Trust from spring 2007. The PCT's financial position and recovery plan has somewhat limited progress on joint commissioning over the past year. However the PCT is fully committed to the commissioning agenda and a joint post is being recruited to take forward this work.

84. Financial management within children's services is good. Financial discipline and budget management and control processes are robust. The council's medium term financial strategy reflects the longer-term needs and priorities within children's services. The council has performed well in managing its spending against available resources and is well placed to continue to do so. However, there are a comparatively large number of schools in deficit and carrying high balances. Recovery planning arrangements and strengthened financial management advice and support to schools is in place. The council has suspended funding delegation to the secondary school with the largest financial deficit. An effective approach to risk management is in place and informing the way in which children's services are working.

85. Services for children and young people represent good value for money. Costs are relatively low and the quality of services is often good. The accent on preventative services in social care and the comparatively high spend on family support services is already reaping rewards in terms of good outcomes and reduced costs. The reduction in social care placements has allowed funding to be re-directed to other priorities. A review of places to reduce reliance on expensive out-of-borough special educational needs placements has taken too long. Suitable proposals are now subject to consultation, but these do not currently address funding issues. The council is further strengthening its approach to improving value for money, with the introduction of targeted value for money reviews of high cost service areas from April 2007.

86. Performance management is good. There are well-established performance management systems and processes within social care and education services and there is a good understanding of performance management throughout children's services. A very high proportion of staff within children's services received an appraisal last year. Service planning is well established and is generally of good quality and effective. There are good examples of partners managing areas of underperformance, for example improvements in the youth service and CAMHS where progress has been good. Steady progress has been made in developing performance management arrangements for the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership, with clear lines of accountability for specific partnership objectives and a robust challenge framework. Scrutiny arrangements within children's services are improving, but are not yet consistently effective or challenging. The quality of management information used by partners is good. The findings of this review are largely consistent with the judgements made by the council and its partners in the self-assessment. The capacity to improve further is good.

## **Annex: The children and young people's section of the corporate assessment report**

1. The council is performing well in this area. Political and managerial leadership is good, with a clear emphasis on improving outcomes for children and young people. The council knows where improvements are needed and has a good track record of turning around underperforming services. Partnership working is good. Robust needs analysis has identified those groups of children and young people who are underachieving. These needs have been clearly prioritised. The council involves children and young people effectively in developing service provision. Overall, outcomes for most children and young people are good.

2. Health services for children and young people are good. Parents and carers receive good support to keep their children healthy. The council and its partners have good knowledge about health inequalities and actively promote healthy lifestyles. Most children and young people with mental health problems receive good multi-agency support. Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have timely access to good specialist health services.

3. The council makes a good contribution to keeping children and young people safe. Its focus on family support and preventative services is long-established and successful. The LSCB retains a clear focus on the core business of keeping children safe, as well as promoting wider awareness of safeguarding issues. The council and its partners collaborate effectively to protect children and young people at risk. Effective action has significantly improved the recruitment and retention of staff. The number of looked after children is low and outcomes for this group are generally better than average. Because the council and its partners have not undertaken enough joint planning for children with disabilities in social care some services are not well coordinated. Services for children with disabilities in social care are therefore adequate.

4. Education services are improving. Parents and carers receive good support in helping their children to enjoy and achieve. Educational provision for 5 to 16 year olds is currently adequate. Effective action by the council has led to improvements including a sharp rise in standards at Key Stage 2. Although GCSE results have also improved, standards are below average. Good use of comprehensive data and a good focus on leadership has been particularly effective in redressing inequalities and improving achievement. Two poorly performing secondary schools have recently re-opened as academies, ahead of schedule. Pupils report many improvements in learning. The number of schools causing concern locally has reduced. Most children and young people can access a good range of high quality recreational facilities and activities. Children and young people who are looked after and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities receive good help to enjoy and achieve.

5. Opportunities for children and young people to be prepared for working life are adequate. Young people have appropriate access to careers education and guidance but only limited opportunities for one-to-one advice. Those at risk of not progressing into education, employment and training are supported well. Weaknesses in the range of provision and outcomes for 14–19 year olds are being addressed, although the council and its partners have yet to agree the best configuration of institutions for delivering post-16 education and training. Fewer looked after children than average progress into education, employment and training. However, a greater proportion enter higher education successfully.

6. Councillors and senior managers have a very good understanding of key issues concerning children and young people. There is a strong shared ambition to make further improvements, supported by a skilled and committed workforce. The capacity to secure further improvements is good.