Inspection of Merton local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 14 to 18 July 2025

Lead inspector: Claire Beckingham, His Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	**Grade**
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of children care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Since the last inspection in February 2022, when Merton was judged to be outstanding, leaders have continued to maintain exceptionally high-quality support for children, including in complex areas of practice, such as extra-familial harm, where the authority routinely delivers highly skilled work that makes a significant difference to children's lives.

Leadership remains a key strength. Despite changes at senior levels, governance and accountability structures are stable and highly effective. Areas identified for improvement in 2022, including out-of-hours care arrangements and housing support for care leavers, have been responded to, with tangible improvements in both practice and outcomes. Children and young people are at the heart of service design and delivery, with participation and co-production well embedded across the system. Where small numbers of children experience some variability in aspects of planning or support, leaders are already acting to strengthen the consistency of response to their needs. As a result, children in Merton are very well cared for, and supported to thrive.

What needs to improve?[1]

- Escalation and action for the small number of children whose circumstances are not improving quickly enough. (Outcome Three, National Framework)
- The quality of assessment and support to children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless. (Outcome Three, National Framework)

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: good

1. Merton's comprehensive early help offer is a strength. Children and families benefit from well-timed support with services that help prevent the need for escalation to statutory interventions and which improve children's experiences. Family Wellbeing Case Practitioners promptly engage families and complete thorough assessments, ensuring that children's voices influence planning. Interventions are effective in reducing risks, addressing concerns and, for some children, helping to prevent criminalisation. Early help plans following step-down from statutory support flow seamlessly from previous assessments or plans, meaning families are not required to retell their stories, and support builds on their existing strengths. Step-up processes are equally well managed and well embedded.

2. When children are referred into the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), social workers and managers ensure there is a swift and proportionate response to children's needs and presenting risks with the requisite level of intervention applied. Workers explore families' unique culture, ethnicity and history. Engagement with fathers supports their role in meeting children's needs. Children are consulted in age-appropriate ways to help inform or shape recommendations. MASH workers demonstrate a strong grasp of domestic abuse concerns. They confidently explore parents' understanding and needs, prioritising victims' and children's immediate safety and considering independent domestic violence adviser services early. The co-location of partner agencies in the MASH is a strength, with social workers collaborating effectively to verify or supplement referral information. Daily partner meetings support a coordinated and proactive response to identify children at risk. Leaders have taken action to strengthen the case management system's tracking functions within the MASH to alleviate reliance on managers' individual manual processes.

3. When concerns arise out of office hours, emergency duty team workers respond promptly, gathering new information and identifying risks, particularly for missing children in care, with clear, detailed recommendations and handover to daytime services.

[1] The areas for improvement have been cross-referenced with the outcomes, enablers or principles in the Children's Social Care: National Framework. This statutory guidance sets out the purpose, principles for practice and expected outcomes of children's social care.

4. When statutory assessments are needed, these are comprehensive, analytical and completed without delay, showing strong consideration of children's and parents' histories and experiences. Parents living outside of the family home are included to ensure a whole-family perspective. Assessments are written to children in a kind, sensitive and child-centred tone. Assessments are completed without delay and children and their families do not need to wait for assessments to conclude before receiving needed support.

5. Social workers build strong relationships with children, using appropriate tools to understand their needs and track progress. Visits are purposeful and well documented, and records written to children are warm and analytical.

6. Social workers act promptly on any concerns of significant harm, convening child protection strategy discussions with relevant multi-agency input. These meetings analyse history, strengths, needs and risks. Children are seen quickly both at home and in appropriate supportive settings during child protection investigations. Safety planning during investigations is embedded, although there is some inconsistency in the quality and clarity of these plans. Outcomes from child protection investigations are appropriate and contain a clear rationale for any decisions reached.

7. Child protection conference minutes reflect consistent attendance and contribution by partner agencies, with a strong analysis of past and current risks and clearly outlined recommendations, supporting effective decision-making and safety planning. Child in need and child protection plans are focused on reducing risk and improving children's circumstances. However, some do not sufficiently identify contingency plans for children.

8. When risks to children escalate or are so significant that the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO) process is initiated, decisions to do so are expeditious. Letters to parents clearly outline concerns, and agreements explain the required changes and actions they need to make to meet the needs of their children. Interventions in pre-proceedings mostly show purposeful planning, oversight and escalation to court when necessary. A very small number of children, particularly those who have experienced long-term neglect, have experienced delays despite PLO escalation. While tracking arrangements monitor timelines, the impact on driving progress for these children is limited. Leaders have acknowledged this and taken immediate steps to tighten oversight and evaluation of the impact of interventions.

9. Disabled children benefit from highly skilled, thoughtful social workers who complete comprehensive assessments that thoroughly identify needs. Extensive plans reflect a multi-agency approach to meeting children's complex needs, resulting in most children making good progress.

10. Work addressing extra-familial harm and children going missing, including those missing from care, is sophisticated and impressive. Return home interviews capture children's voices effectively, exploring push and pull factors that inform

immediate, well-structured plans to help reduce recurrence. Workers demonstrate tenacity in engaging older and disengaged children to address entrenched patterns and networks of extra-familial harm. Regular communication and collaboration across professional and family networks ensure that risk assessments remain current. The timely sharing of information to disrupt sources of harm is embedded across responses for children. Multi-agency screening tools help identify risks early and are routinely updated. Peer and community mapping helps target interventions and improve safety planning for children. Partnerships between key teams, agencies and commissioned services, combined with proactive adolescent team 'walkabouts' in locations frequented by children, ensure that services are accessible to children in their own contexts and groups. The focus remains firmly on children's needs and relationships rather than rigid thresholds, handovers or gateways for service eligibility, while ensuring known risk is understood and responded to effectively, leading to meaningful changes for families.

11. Children in private fostering arrangements are supported by practitioners who are generally thorough and inquisitive. Most assessments are well written and completed in a timely manner.

12. Support for the small number of homeless children is variable. For a very small number of children age 16 and 17 who present as homeless, assessments are delayed and lack curiosity about children's daily experiences. Leaders are aware of this shortfall and have improvement plans in place.

13. Assessments of children who are young carers are largely well written and consider the impact of their caring responsibilities. There is some variability in formally recognising their status as young carers. However, this has not prevented responsive support being provided via Merton's commissioned service. Regular reviews for young carers help capture changes in their circumstances and re-engage children who disengage.

14. The local authority designated officer (LADO) service is effective, processes are well understood, and patterns are monitored and escalated, leading to defined actions to improve safety, such as the installation of CCTV in special educational need transport. Schools highly value the advice and guidance provided by the LADO when they need it.

15. Leaders and managers continue to have strong systems to identify and support children missing education and those educated at home. Leaders know these cohorts well, including their most vulnerable members. Schools appreciate the readily available training and support for their safeguarding work, regular training and updates and supervision for designated safeguarding leads.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

16. Children in care in Merton, including disabled children in care, receive outstanding support from social workers who know them very well. Workers

and children build meaningful, trusting and, very often, lasting relationships, which is helping most children to make significant progress. Children receive regular visits and bespoke support to help them understand change and transitions, and consistent use of tools such as 'Words and Pictures' and life-story work help children make sense of their journeys. Work with older children is highly respectful of their evolving independence, while recognising their vulnerabilities and the need for caring boundaries.

17. Decisions to bring children into care in Merton are timely, purposeful and underpinned by clear social work assessments. Practitioners prioritise high-quality kinship assessments from the outset, informing decisions about the support families need to care for children safely and successfully.

18. Most children in care live in Merton or very nearby and can maintain positive links with their families and communities. Children, including those in residential children's homes, live in stable homes where their needs are very well met. Strong relational practice and collaborative, integrated working contribute to high levels of placement stability. When children do need to move, this consistent approach ensures that important connections with carers and significant others are preserved.

19. Use of unregistered provision is very rare and only ever as a last resort. Comprehensive quality assurance checks, rigorous management oversight and enhanced visiting patterns are routinely implemented, to mitigate the inherent risks for children who have been placed in unregistered provision, while providers are actively encouraged to register with Ofsted, and children's progress is closely monitored.

20. Children's care plans are comprehensive and responsive to their needs and experiences. Regular reviews ensure that plans remain relevant and track progress effectively. Independent reviewing officers demonstrate clear pride in children's achievements, and reviews celebrate progress relevant to their starting points. Children are encouraged and supported to contribute to meetings about their care, ensuring support is tailored to their individual needs. The routine use of advocacy and independent visiting helps further enhance children's input into their own plans and helps them voice their concerns, hopes and ambitions.

21. Participatory approaches with children and young people are a strength in Merton, with children in care well represented by a Children in Care Council, 'Our Voice'.

22. Social workers demonstrate a strong understanding of the rights of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. They provide sensitive, culturally nuanced support and help children navigate complex legal processes related to their immigration status.

23. Children in care are in good health and receive appropriate healthcare interventions when needed. Review health assessments are timely, giving clear information to carers to ensure that children's health needs are well met. Emotional health needs are well recognised and understood, with timely support provided to children when needed. Children benefit from a wide range of opportunities to develop interests, try new hobbies, and enjoy activities with friends, enriching their lives.

24. The virtual school remains a significant asset. Children receive well-tailored educational support. High-quality, personal education plans clearly set out next steps and how they will be achieved. When progress falters, the virtual school engages effectively with partner agencies, modifies plans and intensifies support for children. Consequently, children are achieving well from their respective starting points and a high proportion of children leaving school move into education or training.

25. Social workers and foster carers support children to maintain meaningful relationships. When brothers and sisters cannot live together, work is done to ensure they spend time together in ways that matter for them. Planning for children to return home is underpinned by robust risk assessments with responsive support and appropriate oversight.

26. A high percentage of children in care live in family environments. Merton's leaders have developed services to improve fostering sufficiency and are piloting a DfE-led recruitment approach in response to the growing adolescent population. An evidence-based programme has been successfully delivered to support and retain fostering households.

27. While most children live in stable, long-term homes with invested carers and professionals, for a very small number of children, arrangements to track permanence are not consistently effective in ensuring that the long-term placements children are already living in are formally ratified, or intended legal orders are in place.

28. For children in care with a care plan for adoption, placement orders are secured without avoidable delay, reflecting effective assessment and reporting in care proceedings. Early permanence is appropriately embedded and effectively considered. Adoption planning is timely, with carefully considered matches and well-planned introductions. Merton works collaboratively with the regional adoption agency (Adopt London South - ALS) to ensure that children are matched with suitable adopters. Ongoing support helps children manage contact with birth families and address past trauma.

29. Transitions to adulthood are very well planned. Planning for older children leaving care begins early, with clear pathway plans detailing the support they will need and receive. Care leavers told inspectors they had established relationships with their personal advisers (PAs) before leaving care. For those requiring adult social care, transitional planning is also timely and effective.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: outstanding

30. Care leavers who spoke with inspectors were overwhelmingly positive about the enduring and strong relationships they have with their PAs and how this has contributed to sustained improvements in their lives. The quality, warmth and supportive nature of these relationships are routinely captured in care leavers' records. Records are often joyful to read, full of pride, care, ferocious advocacy and understanding. Most care leavers are visited and contacted in line with their needs by PAs, who are persistent in providing care leavers with the specific support they need when they need it.

31. PAs help care leavers build and maintain relationships with people who are important to them. This includes helping them understand their journey through care. When safe and aligned with care leavers' wishes, PAs help them to rekindle relationships with family and significant others.

32. There is a steadfast focus in Merton on helping care leavers to achieve and maintain good health. PAs help care leavers take control of their own health appointments or facilitate attendance when they need a higher level of help and confidence-building. Emotional well-being and mental health are a priority. PAs demonstrate detailed insight into young people's histories and how past adversity can impact their well-being, ensuring appropriate referrals to more specialist services when necessary.

33. Most care leavers live in suitable accommodation where they say they are happy. Staying put is used well to provide security and stability. This helps ensure that care leavers develop the skills needed for living independently. This enables them to go on to successfully manage their own tenancies.

34. Care leavers are supported to learn, earn and make progress. PAs and the virtual school work consistently and collaboratively to identify meaningful opportunities aligned to the interests, talents and ambitions of their care leavers. PAs are proud of care leavers' achievements. These are celebrated widely by PAs, managers and senior leaders. Care leavers are supported to attend college and university, find work or apprenticeships through the many different routes available to them. When young people experience setbacks, they are helped to remain persistent in the pursuit of their goals, through appropriate educational and training pathways. Workshops facilitated by the Income Maximisation Officer help young people learn more about their rights in relation to their money, tenancy agreements and managing bills.

35. Pathway plans are co-produced with care leavers. Their wishes and feelings are very well identified. Plans are updated regularly and often record information about the specifics of the local offer and how to access the full offer, so that care leavers are kept well informed about their rights and entitlements.

36. Merton's care leavers are a priority for the council. This is reflected in the wide-ranging and well-publicised local offer that encompasses financial and practical

support and services to help care leavers with their health and well-being. Flexibility and creativity in the financial elements of the offer help care leavers succeed, exercise choice and navigate any financial stresses.

37. Bespoke support for specific groups largely offers effective and timely support to reduce vulnerability. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers receive specific support to process traumas experienced during their life journeys, find family members and receive legal advice. Care-experienced young people who are parents receive additional practical assistance, which helps them to prepare for and parent their own children. Care leavers in custody continue to receive visits from PAs, but there is variability in the quality of service for this group of care leavers. While PAs are persistent in trying to organise visits, their efforts are hindered by prison processes and not all unsuccessful visits are rebooked quickly. Leaders have recently identified a probation link worker to improve the communication between PAs and prisons.

38. When risks of exploitation arise or escalate, care leavers receive enhanced support to keep themselves safe. PAs and carers work collaboratively with other agencies, stepping in to help the care leavers to take back control and to keep themselves safe.

39. Care leavers over 21 are supported to stay in touch and access support as and when needed. PAs provide care leavers with consistency through pre-existing relationships. This includes appropriate 'touch-ins' with young people over 25. These adults turn to their former PAs when they have questions or concerns, highlighting the strength and enduring nature of these relationships.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: outstanding

40. Children in Merton benefit from a caring and ambitious leadership team that has a clear, child-centred vision. Leaders know their children well. Leaders were able to describe children's histories, their extended families, achievements and life events in detail. In some cases, leaders had been the first professionals to visit children and care leavers when they became known to the service years ago. Like social workers, they talk with pride about children and care leavers.

41. Despite a change in the director of children's services (DCS), governance and accountability structures have remained stable and effective. The chief executive spoke of confidence in the DCS's leadership, highlighting the balance of support to develop and autonomy that enables the DCS to excel in her role and exercise strong decision-making. The working relationship between senior leaders is characterised by responsiveness, transparency and ambition for children, with leaders at all levels taking their corporate parenting responsibilities very seriously. The Corporate Parenting Board, championed by the DCS, has embedded a whole-council approach, with pledges and leads at director and executive director level. A passionate, committed and well-informed lead member and cabinet member work seamlessly together,

complementing corporate leadership across children's services, education and lifelong learning. Political leaders are well-sighted on the experiences of children, the needs of the workforce and the contribution of partner agencies across the system. Strategic partnerships remain mature, appropriately challenging and solution focused.

42. The commitment to the right people at the right level taking accountability for improving experiences for children is visible in practice and runs through the council from housing developments to education partnerships, and it highlights the prioritisation of children's needs across council services. Early years, housing departments, health and key partnerships work cohesively alongside and through children's services. There is a collective response to need, and social workers spoke positively about their 'colleagues' in other departments, reflecting a collective culture committed to meeting children's needs.

43. Leaders from partner organisations, including school leaders and the independent scrutineer, describe Merton Council as a learning and solutions-focused authority. The judiciary and Cafcass are particularly positive about Merton's work in the family justice arena, highlighting strong continuity of social workers, effective court practice and a constructive, well-established relationship with the courts.

44. The quality assurance framework is robust, blending compliance with learning and placing strong emphasis on reflective practice. Social workers are positive about audits and collaborative reviews, embracing them as genuine learning opportunities. Merton's self-evaluation is cohesive and sensible, and the quality assurance programme is intelligently designed to hold practice to account and drive improvement. Leaders know their services very well. Areas for improvement highlighted through the inspection already featured in leaders' plans for strengthening the effectiveness of services. Where inspectors found variability in the quality of services for a minority of children, the response of leaders was open and led to immediate actions aimed at improvement. This reflects what partner agencies say they see as a learning and professionally curious organisation that is open to challenge and scrutiny.

45. Workforce development is a high priority, with a strong targeted and strategic development offer. The training programme is comprehensive, well attended and aligned with safeguarding priorities. A range of initiatives have been introduced to strengthen child-centred practice, including training co-produced and jointly delivered with children and a shift to 'writing to the child' in recording practice. A range of learning and development opportunities all contribute to a well-supported and skilled workforce. Merton's workforce is largely permanent, with caseloads managed at a level that enables purposeful work. Staff feel well supported by colleagues, managers and leaders. Workers state that if you leave Merton, 'You'll be back.' Many children and young people have longstanding relationships with their workers, extending into adulthood. Workers told inspectors they love the children they work with. Leaders encourage this, to the benefit of both workers and children. Workers have time

for reflection, analysis, to build relationships and to simply play with their children.

46. Merton's commitment to relational practice, participation and co-production streams is multifaceted, effective and impressive. Inspectors heard from parents and an extensive number of young people, including young inspectors, youth parliament members, children in care, care leavers, young scrutineers and members of empowerment groups. Participants in these groups are confident, insightful and passionate about improving their communities. Their lived experiences inform their contributions, whether through training delivery, public safety initiatives, or advocating for safer spaces. Their involvement is meaningful. They are listened to, their ideas are acted on, and their impact is tangible, from influencing service design to building trust with local police officers. There is a strong and genuine commitment to youth participation, with children and young people actively shaping services and driving change across the borough.

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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