

# London Borough of Merton Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	Sean White
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<b>Setting address</b>	London Borough of Merton, Worsfold House, Church Road, MITCHAM, Surrey, CR4 3FA
<b>Telephone number</b>	020 8545 4220
<b>Email</b>	
<b>Registered person</b>	London Borough of Merton,
<b>Registered manager</b>	manager
<b>Responsible individual</b>	Rea Mattocks
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## About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

## The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality  
Good: this aspect of the provision is strong  
Satisfactory: this aspect of the provision is sound  
Inadequate: this aspect of the provision is not good enough

## Service information

### Brief description of the service

The adoption agency of the London Borough of Merton operates all the statutory duties it carries responsibility for under current legislation. This includes: the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters; the matching and placement of children with suitable families; support to people who have been affected by adoption.

The service operates from accessible premises in Mitcham.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is inadequate - notice of action to improve.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

The agency demonstrated a strong approach to the recruitment of adopters and the matching of children with suitable families. Preparation and assessment of adopters is generally good but there are inconsistencies, however, in the standard of assessment reports (Forms F) and Child Permanence Reports (CPRs) and the adoption panel, whilst thorough, was somewhat inefficiently managed.

There is a team of workers with a range of experiences but some (from overseas) have yet to develop a clear understanding of English adoption law and practice; the recruitment and induction of workers is not consistent; appointed workers being more thoroughly recruited than locums.

The service is managed by appropriately qualified and experienced professionals, but the adoption team is managed on a temporary basis by a locum.

The agency has a strong approach to supporting adoptive placements and those affected by adoption; this is achieved through innovative approaches to complex and demanding situations and by accessing a range of specialists to enhance the agency's resources in the adoption support team.

The approach to working with birth parents is generally good, but inconsistencies in developing life-story work were evident.

Although there is a sound management infrastructure, and a recent audit of the agency's policies and practices had recently been completed, there is too much inconsistent practice across the board within its organisation.

## **Improvements since the last inspection**

Following the last key inspection three years ago there were 20 requirements (actions) and 11 recommendations. A random inspection carried out in February 2006 produced eight requirements and six recommendations. This suggests that the agency was gradually improving. This continues to be the case but there are still nine issues outstanding from both the previous inspections that have not been satisfactorily addressed.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is not judged.

## **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is inadequate.

The agency has a strong approach to matching children with the most suitable families. It has an informed approach aided by the efforts of a publicity officer who ensures she is up to date with the needs of children requiring placements; she attends team meetings and liaises with social workers to maintain contemporary knowledge. Case records showed a detailed thoroughness to matching considerations and general practice is informed by a clear service plan.

The information provided by children's social workers in permanence reports (CPRs) is of an uneven standard; this compromises the panel's ability to make accurate judgements when making recommendations about suitability to adopt and appropriate matching. There is the added issue of how the reports are written and the different readership for which they have to have meaning. Quality control of these reports is insufficiently robust and there is a training element required to improve matters.

The agency works closely with other authorities in the local consortium and has clear procedures for using the national adoption register.

The preparation and assessment of adopters is carried out in a formal and systematic way; adopters said that they were satisfied with the thoroughness of the process and that they felt well informed and suitably prepared for their chosen path. Assessments are generally satisfactory and thorough but in some instances reports were lacking in analysis; this may be due to the lack of experience of the adoption team. All checks and references are routinely carried out but the health and safety checklist in respect of applicants' homes is lacking some important detail; for instance, the check should include cords for window blinds and firearms.

The practice of the agency in some instances is to have prospective adopters attend preparation groups prior to their application being made; this is contrary to

regulations and government guidance and should cease. Application must be made before attendance on preparation courses.

The adoption panel was suitably constituted, although it was not possible to determine with any certainty the dates when members commenced their positions; this makes it difficult to ascertain when their tenure ceases. It meets on a monthly basis which is sufficient for the amount of business it has to address. The panel's deliberations on, and analysis of, the information before it was very thorough with particularly strong information being provided by the medical adviser. The attending prospective adopter was involved throughout the duration of the proceedings; although it is the practice to invite adopters to the panel, the policy and procedure says they should attend, unless there are reasons why they cannot, but then goes on to say attendance is not compulsory. This is a mixed message and not in the spirit of the regulations.

The 'style' of the panel's proceedings is to invite social workers and applicants into the room at a very early stage. This means that quality issues in respect of reports submitted are addressed in front of everyone involved. It is clear that this causes anxiety and embarrassment, and although it is acknowledged that people must account for the work that they produce, this model may not produce the best outcomes.

The approach of the panel concentrates on the needs of the child, and his/her future welfare and safety through detailed examination of all the information available. The arrangements for administering and managing panel business are not always well organised; there were some instances where panel papers had not been received promptly. A senior manager with responsibility for the adoption service and looked after children is a member of the panel; this poses some issues of conflict of interest. The management of the panel, although thorough, was not particularly efficient and the proceedings were over-long.

Decision-making is undertaken with due conscientiousness and understanding and is well organised in terms of timescales, although it was reported that there is sometimes delay in the production and checking of the panel minutes.

There is an experienced and qualified management structure, which has been recently strengthened, in place but the adoption team manager is not employed by the agency; being a locum manager supplied by an agency. Although she has been in post for more than a year, such an arrangement can only be seen as temporary. Regulations make clear that the agency must appoint a manager; they also make clear that the registration authority should be notified of any changes to the management, which has not occurred.

The adoption team has a range of different experiences in its membership; some workers are from overseas and have yet to develop a clear understanding of English law, standards and practices. One recently appointed worker had not had a formal induction and had used her own initiative to develop knowledge; this is not best practice. There is little evidence of the Post Qualifying Childcare Award (PQ) being

pursued. Recruitment practices were not satisfactory; there were different systems in place for appointed workers and agency workers and CRB checks were not consistently sought; this is unsafe practice for workers involved with vulnerable children.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is good.

This is a strong aspect of the agency's work. Adopters with children in placement said that they felt well supported by both the agency in general and the individual workers, who maintain supportive contact after their approval right through until an adoption order is made. It was evident that adoption team workers liaise with children's social workers to enable placements to settle in and develop as a new family.

The adoption support team has an innovative and committed approach to undertaking a wide range of, often complex, responsibilities. There are well established formal and pragmatic relationships with the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), which enables the agency to provide appropriately informed services in a focused way.

The team also provides support services to a wide range of people touched by adoption, including adults who have been adopted and wish to trace their birth families, birth records counselling, direct contact between adopted children and their birth families.

Other specialist advice that informs the support services is provided by both the medical adviser, who demonstrated significant understanding and knowledge of issues associated with children being placed for adoption and legal advisers. In one very complex case, records showed that there was a very sophisticated approach to accessing very good legal advice.

Support services are satisfactorily resourced, although one established worker is employed through an agency and will soon leave to be replaced by a permanent member of the team.

The work undertaken by the team is informed by good social work practice. Assessments of need are carried out wherever appropriate or necessary and case records showed a committed and professional approach to its responsibilities.

## **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is satisfactory.

The adoption support team carries the responsibility of working with and supporting birth parents whose children have been placed for adoption. All birth parents and significant birth family members are offered support by the team and this continues

for as long as necessary.

Case records showed that birth parents are as involved as they wish to be in planning for the future of their children and are given every opportunity to express their views and wishes. This approach was also respected by adopters who were pleased with the agency's attitudes and practices in respect of planning and contact arrangements.

Although there is a strong approach to the involvement of birth families, the agency's practices in respect of developing life-story work is somewhat patchy. There were some good examples of life-story work being undertaken and completed on time but, in general, there is an inconsistent approach. In some instances life-story work is not completed at the appropriate time. There is some collaborative working between the children's social workers and the adoption support team that 'gets things done' but there is no formal or systematic approach, or training, that addresses this issue.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is inadequate.

The underpinning framework of the agency is generally good, and very good in some instances. The Statement of Purpose (SOP), children's guide and a range of information about the agency's responsibilities, are well put together and informative. There is a comprehensive, up to date, policy and procedure framework that provides a clear and informed approach to the service's work and range of duties.

The managers in the agency are experienced, qualified and knowledgeable about adoption matters and bring an informed and committed approach to their work. A 'root and branch' audit of the whole agency against the NMS and regulations has been recently completed; this has provided the agency with management information that should enable strategic development to be cultivated from a well informed perspective. The executive and senior management are suitably informed of the work of the agency with twice yearly reports being produced; and, equally importantly, through the commitment and involvement of people at all levels of the authority.

The operational management of the agency is suitably structured with areas of responsibility and accountability being clear and understood; there are clear procedures for deputising in the absence of the team manager. But see below regarding the temporary nature of the team manager.



Workload management and allocation appears appropriately organised, despite their being no formal system in place, and staff felt that their duties and responsibilities were manageable within the resources available. However, induction processes and casework supervision were found to be rather inconsistent and irregular; this had led to recent discussions between managers and staff about the frequency and availability of supervision. One worker had only received supervision once during the three months following her appointment. Although there are sufficient staffing resources, their collective skills and knowledge need to be expanded.

Given that the staff team is made up of people with a range of experience, and some are very inexperienced in English adoption matters, the issues regarding induction and supervision are important ones to address. The fact that the team manager is a 'temporary' agency worker and not employed by the authority adds a further dimension to the management/supervision/development issue that senior managers should monitor closely.

The availability of training opportunities, both internal and external, is good. Workers have had access to some important and necessary training in recent times and it was clear that managers encourage professional development (although see above regarding induction training, which is more limited in scope and availability).

The management of case files is in need of improvement. It was not clear who took responsibility for case file management and there was little, if any, evidence of formal monitoring or auditing. There were important records missing from some files and it was found that, for instance, adoption panel minutes may not be placed on case files for some months after the event. Children's adoption case records, although supported by very clear practice procedures, did not contain the information required by regulations.

The practices surrounding the archiving of case records are also unsatisfactory. A support worker carries responsibility for archive and retrieval; she has had no formal training in these duties and it became clear that the archives are not well maintained. Archiving is done in 'bulk' at unspecified times and the retrieval system is perfunctory and prone to errors (a file was noted as being retrieved nine months previously by a worker no longer employed). The archive building is not staffed, does not have an intruder alarm, has a fire alarm that had no record of being tested and is not entirely secure. The adoption records, however, are contained in fire-proof safes, which appear suitable and secure. Files stored in the adoption team office are appropriately secure.

Records in respect of employed staff, agency workers and adoption panel members did not meet NMS or regulatory requirements. One worker's CRB was two years out of date, written references are not routinely verified by 'phone and one locum worker had a CRB done by a swimming club not associated with the agency. Panel members' records did not include all required information to judge the suitability of every person.

The service is located in premises close to the centre of Mitcham and is accessible by

both car and public transport. The premises provide a comfortable, secure environment and are satisfactorily resourced.

## What must be done to secure future improvement?

### Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
4	receive the application form from prospective adopters before providing preparation training. Regulations 22 & 24 AAR 2005.	01/10/2007
15	appoint a person to be the manager of the agency. Reg. 5 LAAS 2003.	01/10/2007
15	notify the registration authority (Ofsted) of any changes to the management arrangements. Reg. 5(2) LAAS 2003.	01/10/2007
19	take steps to have all staff working for the purposes of the agency to have an up to date CRB check and to implement a system to renew those checks every three years. Reg. 11 LAAS 2003.	01/10/2007
25	undertake an audit of adopters case files and make arrangements for all required information to be placed on those files in a reasonable and accessible format. Reg. 22 AAR 2005.	01/10/2007
25	undertake to place on children's adoption files all required information. Reg. 12 AAR 2005.	01/10/2007
28	take steps to place on staff personnel files and adoption panel members' files, all required information. Regs. 6, 11 & 15: Schedules 3 & 4 LAAS 2003.	01/10/2007
25	take steps to make all case records secure, accessible and free from any risk. Reg. 39 AAR 2005.	01/10/2007

### Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- Develop a more consistent approach to the writing of Children's Permanence reports.
- Develop a more consistent, analytical approach to the writing of Forms F.
- Develop a more comprehensive health and safety checklist, to include firearms and curtain/blind pull-cords.
- Write an adoption panel procedure that is consistent and not contradictory in

respect of adopters attending the panel.

- Provide for a more efficiently managed adoption panel.
- Improve the administration of the adoption panel to be as efficient as possible to enable panel members to receive their information on time.
- Make arrangements for all workers, regardless of their previous experience, to have an induction period following appointment to enable them to become familiar with and confident/competent in their new responsibilities and duties.
- Make arrangements for Life-story work, including the production of later-life letters, to be given greater emphasis and training.
- Make arrangements for all workers to receive regular, good quality supervision to support and inform their casework.
- Make arrangements for all records, in particular adopters' and children's case records, to be subjected to routine, thorough monitoring and auditing on a regular and frequent basis.
- Make arrangements for more robust systems for the archiving and retrieval of records.