

London Borough of Merton Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

Unique reference number	SC057813
Inspection date	01/02/2013
Inspector	Rosemary Dancer / Diane Thackrah
Type of inspection	Full

Setting address	London Borough of Merton, Merton Civic Centre, London Road, MORDEN, Surrey, SM4 5DX
Telephone number	020 8545 4220
Email	
Registered person	London Borough of Merton
Registered manager	Laura Stewart
Responsible individual	Sheila Caie
Date of last inspection	13/07/2009

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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; and support to people who have been affected by adoption. The service operates from accessible premises in Morden.

At the time of the inspection the service had 14 children who had adoption as a plan for adoption, eight of whom had been placed in their proposed adoptive placement. It had 12 approved adopters, four of whom had children placed with them.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

Good: a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

Adequate: a service that only meets minimum requirements

Inadequate: a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **good**.

Overall the adoption agency provides an effective service to all affected by adoption. The lifelong implications of adoption are fully understood and people's needs are catered for, whatever their age. Adoption is viewed as a positive option for all children needing permanency, whatever their needs or characteristics. For example, there have been two recent successful placements for children with complex disabilities.

The service generally obtains the views of the child and their birth parents when planning for permanency; where appropriate and possible these views are acted upon. Children with siblings placed for adoption are placed together whenever it is appropriate and possible to do so.

Family finding for children is undertaken in a systematic way, and generally placement choice for children is not limited due to financial constraints. Social workers really get to know the child and this helps to inform the placement choice and the prospective adopters.

Children placed for adoption overall experience positive outcomes because they are

matched and placed with parents who love and understand them and meet their needs well. The arrangements for supporting families are strong. There are good arrangements between the service and education and health service providers to ensure children achieve and remain healthy. The joint work between the service and the child and adolescent mental health (CAMHS) workers is of specific note; this work undoubtedly helps to stabilise placements. The service's success in the placement processes and support provided to families is reflected by the low rate of disruptions; only one has occurred over the past 18 months and this is a good indication that stable placements are made and maintained.

The approach to safeguarding is proactive and staff understand the complexities involved in safeguarding practice; this means children's well-being and safety are assured.

The service is operated in a professional way and is child-focused. New arrangements for the management of the service, both in terms of personnel and structure, are impacting positively on the quality of the service provided and on the timescales for children. There are much improved tracking and monitoring systems that clearly show the progress of each child through the system. The new leadership and management arrangements are strong and there is an energetic and honest approach taken to addressing shortfalls, although there remains a level of uncertainty because the arrangements for senior managers are interim.

The increase in expectations and a higher level of accountability have been welcomed by staff who feel that Merton is a safer place to work than it was previously. All levels of staff are fully committed to improving the quality of the service provided further. Staff are of a high calibre, suitably qualified, skilled and experienced and they are well supported in their respective roles. Despite the improvements made, staff at all levels are not complacent about the need for continual improvement.

The numbers of children placed for adoption are higher than the national average. This is despite relatively large numbers of children returning to live with their birth family and a lower rate of younger children becoming looked after; this means that there are fewer children who are likely to need an adoptive family living in the borough than is the case nationally.

When there is delay placing children this is usually for valid reasons or due to matters beyond the control of the service such as delays with care proceedings; recent unpublished data show that there has been improvement in the time taken to place children.

The timescales for adopters and for deciding a child should be placed for adoption are two areas for improvement that have a direct impact on children. The information for birth parents about how they access support, and the information for children about how to access their reviewing officer are also areas for improvement. The Statement of Purpose includes the previous address for Ofsted and requires updating; these latter issues have little or no impact on children.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- ensure that the guides for children include information about how they can contact their independent reviewing officer, and update the address and contact details for Ofsted and the Children's Rights Director (NMS 18.5)
- ensure that the address and telephone number for Ofsted contained within the statement of purpose is updated (Regulation 2 (1) Schedule 1 The Local Authority Adoption Services (England) Regulations 2003)
- ensure the decision maker makes a decision about if child should be placed for adoption within two months of the statutory review where adoption was identified as the permanence plan (NMS 17.6)
- ensure the adoption panel makes a considered recommendation on the suitability of a prospective adopter to adopt within eight months of receipt of the prospective adopter's formal application to adopt (NMS 17.7)
- improve the information provided to birth parents about the support available to them. (NMS 12.4)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **good**.

Published data show that Merton's performance relating to the percentage of children who wait less than 21 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family is below the national average. However, the service is ambitious to place children with challenging needs or characteristics when adoption is considered to be in their best interests, and this impacts on the service's ability to place children quickly. Also the time taken to conclude care proceedings, which is above the national average, has a significant impact on the service's ability to meet performance indicators. More recent unpublished data provided by the agency for this inspection indicate improvements have been achieved in various areas. For example, from the 10 months between 1 April 2012 to 31 Jan 2013 of the seven children identified as needing a placement, three had been placed well within the timescales. A fourth child is placed within a concurrent placement so already living within the family that hopes to adopt them. For the other three children there are clear plans for matching or linking them with suitable adopters; for two of these children the potential to place within a family in which they have siblings living is being explored. While it cannot be assumed that all of these plans will come to fruition, it does demonstrate that the planning for placement of the children is proactive.

It is of note that the agency has placed two children for adoption who have complex disabilities and while both of these children had a wait before a placement was identified, the agency was committed to ensuring that they were placed for permanency via adoption. Likewise a third child, for whom there has been some delay, has been matched with a family member, in line with her wishes, who lives overseas; much of the delay has been due to legal and immigration issues.

Children are prepared well for adoption and understand what is happening to them; this work is carried out in a professional way by skilled workers who know the child well. The service is good at ensuring that all relevant information is gathered, as far as is possible, such as information about their birth family and their early lives. This information feeds into preparing the child for adoption and ensures that this work is personalised. While some children are too young to understand the information, it is gathered for the child to access in the future with the help of their adopters.

Children's views are listened to and acted upon. This means that children are best able to fully invest in their permanent placement because they have had some input into choosing the sort of placement they would like to live in. There has been some skilled work carried out with children with disabilities, for example, in respect to ensuring that information is communicated to them in a way that meets their level of understanding and ability.

The arrangements for family finding, matching and the placement of children have improved and are far more robustly monitored. Careful consideration of the child's needs means that clear assessments are made about the type of placement that will best meet their needs; for some children with emotional difficulties this assessment is supported by workers from the CAMHS. Adopters and children are well supported during the matching and introduction processes and this means the family has a sound start to their lives together and children settle well. Adopters' comments included: 'He was a perfect match', and, 'matching was fantastic.' Children become familiar with their prospective adopters and their homes through adopters making up books or other information to share with the child. One very good example was noted. Adopters had made a talking book containing pictures and recordings of the adopters' voices for two very young children. This meant that these children recognised their prospective adopters' faces and voices at their first meeting.

Children make good progress, over time, while living with their adoptive families. Children, with support from their adopters and the service, progress in their social and emotional development. Because prospective adopters are provided with information about the known needs of the child placed with them and the impact these may have on them, they are well equipped to meet these needs. For children who have attachment difficulties, adopters have access to support to help children develop more secure attachments via the adoption team and the CAMHS. This work can be long and painstaking but children are not given up on easily and for many this work is successful. These attachments form the basis for children to achieve well in all areas of their lives and help them to feel safe, secure, valued and loved. They learn to develop appropriate coping strategies and this impacts positively on their behaviour and general social skills. Their confidence in their abilities increases, as

does their self-esteem. Children seen during the course of the inspection were clearly developing sound attachments to their adoptive parents, who were attuned and very attentive to their needs.

Children benefit from the adoption service working in partnership with other agencies such as education. Children progress well in their education in line with their potential. The service supports schools, through training and other support, in understanding the complex needs of many of the children placed; this training has a focus on attachment difficulties and the impact these can have on children's behaviour, emotional well-being and ability to learn and achieve. This means that teachers can adapt their teaching and behaviour management styles to meet these needs and help children to achieve well in their education.

Children's health needs are well met because of partnership working with health services. For some children their health has improved significantly since being placed with their adoptive families because they are supported to access relevant services to support and sustain improvement. For example, a child who was not mobile has been supported by the adopters to access treatment abroad and surgery in this country and the child is now mobile. Routine registration and appointments with health providers after placement, such as with General Practitioners and dentists, ensure that any health problems continue to be identified and addressed promptly.

Children maintain a sense of identity and heritage through contact arrangements that are supported by their adopters and the service where required. This means that children maintain a link to those who have been significant in their lives and it paves the way for a reunion in the future if a young adult wishes this.

Assessments of prospective adopters ensure that the environments that children live in are suitable to meet their needs. Some examples were noted whereby the service had invested in ensuring that children with disabilities could be placed by providing financial support and adaptations to homes in conjunction with health services, although financial support is not always agreed in a timely way.

Quality of service

The quality of the service is **adequate**.

The agency recruits adopters using a well-informed recruitment strategy that takes account of the up-to-date situation in the borough. The service takes an inclusive approach to recruiting people from all backgrounds and circumstances. There is an improving focus on ensuring that those enquirers who are most likely to be the best resource for children requiring an adoptive placement are progressed through the process.

The timescales for adopters' assessments have been poor. From 1 April 2011 to 31 March 2012 only 12% of adopters' assessments were carried out within timescales. In the 10 months from 1 April 2012 to end of January 2013 this has risen to 39% being assessed within timescales. Many of these cases are on hold for valid reasons

relating to the personal circumstances of the applicants but this remains an area of practice requiring improvement.

In respect of people wanting to adopt from overseas, these enquirers are referred to a voluntary adoption agency which prepares, assesses and approves them; they then come back to the agency for support following a placement.

Overall, enquirers, applicants and adopters feel valued and welcomed by the agency and are confident that they will be well supported. The information provided to them about adoption is useful and helps them make a decision about if adoption is right for them. Adopters' comments included, 'Merton is very thorough', and, 'Merton has been really helpful.' Regarding timescales, one adopter stated that for them the time it took from their application to their approval had been 'helpful to get our heads around adoption'.

The preparation of adopters helps them to understand the likely needs of children requiring a placement and they find the preparation groups informative and enlightening. The assessment process, which is run alongside the preparation courses, is based firmly on identifying each applicant's ability to meet the likely needs of children waiting for adoption. Because the preparation courses and assessment process are run simultaneously, there are good opportunities for applicants to check out anything arising from the preparation sessions with their social worker on an on-going basis. Assessments are generally of a good quality, analytical and clearly identify the strengths and the areas for development. These assessments inform the matching and support planning processes. An adopter commented, 'Everyone is knowledgeable, it's been a good experience.'

Support to placements is underpinned by a detailed support strategy. Some good support packages were noted that have helped positive outcomes for children to be achieved. It is clear that adoption is seen as a lifelong process and families can access support at any stage. Support planning in individual cases is well assessed and tailored to individual needs. There are very good arrangements in relation to therapeutic support to families. Some of this support is provided in house by the social workers who are trained to use therapeutic techniques. Of specific note is the work carried out jointly by the social workers and workers from the CAMHS. This work not only supports placements made very well but informs the planning for children and the family-finding and matching processes; this ensures that the best placement for each child is made and maintained. The working relationships between the adoption service and the CAMHS are of a very high quality and it is clear that there are shared aims and objectives between the teams. More general support is provided to all families through the provision of support groups, training and annual fun days. These events are informative and enable adults and children affected by adoption to come together and share their experiences. Some of these arrangements are delivered jointly with consortium members and this allows for a wider range of events to be delivered than could be achieved by a small authority such as Merton.

Birth families are supported to be involved in the planning for their child with varying levels of success. They are informed that there is a worker allocated to help them

understand the plan for their child and a referral is made to the adoption support team. The team will provide this support at any stage the parent may feel able to access it. There is an information sheet for birth parents about adoption but it does not provide them with much detail about the support available to them and how to access it. Birth parents' views about adoption are obtained, recorded within the child's permanence report and some examples were noted whereby their wishes had been able to be acted upon. Birth parents are supported well to fulfil contact arrangements post adoption and this means that they are reassured about how their child is progressing. One birth parent stated that the service, 'persisted in offering support', and went on to say that the service has helped with many aspects in her life.

The work relating to birth records counselling and birth relative initiated contact is of a good quality and sensitively undertaken. This work helps people to better understand their heritage and for some they have been able to re-establish relationships with birth family members in a safe way. One person who had received a service stated, 'Very sensitive and professional throughout, it is fabulous what is offered...invaluable service.' Some sensitive work was noted with an adult in their 90s who decided at a late stage of life they wanted to know about their history; this work was carried out, in the person's home so that they did not have a journey into the office.

There has been a very recent change to the adoption panel in that a new panel has been constituted to combine the adoption and permanence work. Training has been provided to members in relation to the new arrangement and early signs are that it is bedding down well. Prospective adopters attend the panel slot their case is being heard and most feel that they had been treated with sensitivity and some commented that they were pleased to have been informed of the panel recommendation before they left the building.

The panel operates effectively, with the benefit of an adviser who is managed within the safeguarding and quality assurance division, and members with a range of knowledge and experience in different fields. Panel minutes are clear and provide a good view of the discussion, and clearly state the recommendations and advice the panel might provide.

The timescales from the review to a decision being made about if a child should be placed for adoption have not always been adhered to. While for some there are plausible explanations for this and early signs are that the new arrangements for how the decision is reached are having a positive impact on these timescales, there will need to be a continued focus on ensuring that improvements become embedded in practice. The actual process by which the decision maker reaches her decision is effective.

Safeguarding children and young people

The service is **good** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

Children are protected from harm by the service and their adopters, who have been appropriately recruited, assessed and trained. The preparation courses for adopters are informed by current research into abuse and childcare. This means that they fully understand and appreciate the impact abuse and adverse past experiences have on children and their behaviour. Likewise adopters are well supported and this means that they become confident in parenting their children safely. Adopters fully understand the complex needs of their children and parent them accordingly; this helps children to feel safe and placements to be secure. The arrangements for ensuring that only safe people work with children are effective. The training staff receive ensures that they fully understand the complexity of safeguarding practice.

Allegations or suspicions of harm are dealt with effectively, through the implementation of a detailed safeguarding policy and the associated procedures and practice. Safeguarding practice is always in the best interests of children but remains sensitive to adopters' needs; adopters are supported when they are the subject of an allegation.

The service has a low rate of disruptions, with only one occurrence in the last 18 months. This situation, which involved safeguarding concerns regarding a Merton child placed in another local authority's area, was dealt with appropriately. The authority identified appropriate recommendations in respect of the future plans for the child that ensure that he is safe and recovers from his experience. The learning points identified from this case were shared with the panel and social workers to guide their future practice.

The service's work with adults is delivered sensitively and with their safety and well-being in mind. Likewise there is careful consideration given to the well-being and safety of others, for example when an intermediary service is being provided. In the event of a disclosure of historical abuse, the service has clear policies and procedures for staff to follow.

A strength of the service is the arrangement for the management of the adviser to the adoption panel. She is managed from within the safeguarding and quality assurance division; this provides a good level of independence from the operational teams and a clear safeguarding focus to monitoring the work of the agency.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the local authority adoption agency are **good**.

Since the last inspection all of the seven recommendations made have been addressed. The quality of reports written in respect to prospective adopters and children have improved; an adequate system to audit files has been introduced; considerable attention has been paid to the quality and timeliness of life story books for children and this has ensured children can better understand their situation; a procedure has been developed regarding dealing with historical abuse and this ensures that staff know what to do in the event of a disclosure being made; the service to birth parents now includes referral to the adoption social workers and this

provides them with better opportunities to access support from an independent source; and the team has moved to more appropriate premises that are fit for purpose.

Published data show that the authority has a higher than average rate of numbers of children leaving care as a result of adoption. Over the period of 2010-2011 Merton placed 5% of its looked after children for adoption which was higher than the national average of 4% and much higher than its statistical neighbour rate of 2.8%. This percentage has further risen to 6% in the recently published adoption scorecard (November 2012). This has been achieved despite there being a relatively large number of children, 52.6%, who return to live with their birth family, compared with their statistical neighbour rate of 39.2%. Additionally, the rates of children looked after from birth to under 10 is lower than the national average; this means that there are fewer children who are likely to need an adoptive family living in the borough than is the case nationally. The data also show that while the average time between the authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match was longer in 2009 to 2012 when compared to the previous period, the average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family has improved. Merton's timescales had been affected by the average length of care proceedings at 62 weeks; this is above the 53 weeks for England and caused delay that is out of the authority's control, for some children. Unpublished data provided by the service shows that cases concluded in 2012 averaged 41 weeks for domestic adoption.

Despite there being interim senior management arrangements for the service it is clear that this is a service that is developing in a planned way and the changes made have been well thought through with a firm focus on improving the outcomes for children.

Following the publication of the Adoption Scorecard, which prompted a visit from the Department of Education, improvements in many areas of the service's work have been achieved through the implementation of a detailed action plan. There are improved arrangements for identifying children who may benefit from adoption. These arrangements have a clear focus on ensuring that children are identified as potentially needing an adoptive placement at an early stage. Work carried out has included a review of all cases of children who have been adopted since 2008, and the findings have been fed into the Adoption and Permanency Improvement Plan. The adoption and permanence team now attend all second reviews where a permanence decision needs to be made, which means that it is clear at an early stage there may be a plan for adoption. This also ensures that the adoption team is alerted to the needs and characteristics of the child and they can begin to consider the type of adopter that would best suit them. There are regular permanency tracking meetings chaired by the quality assurance manager for permanence; the social workers confirm these meetings scrutinise and challenge their planning for the child. The service has also introduced a system whereby senior managers act as champions for a specific child with a plan for adoption; this adds another level of scrutiny and challenge to drive forward adoption plans.

Clear reporting to the executive about the strengths and shortfalls ensure that they are kept fully up to date with developments. The improvement agenda has been supported through the commissioning of an independent expert perspective about where improvements were needed; the findings of this work were fed into the improvement action plan developed. Leaders and managers are fully aware of the shortfalls that remain and have demonstrated a drive and commitment to ensure the action plan is followed through.

The calibre of fieldwork staff working for the service is high and all work maintains a firm focus on children. Staff are well qualified and experienced in their respective roles and well supported through supervision, training and peer support. Staff demonstrated a high level of knowledge, skills and experience in working with children and in adoption work and their enthusiasm to drive forward the service provided to children and people affected by adoption was impressive. The social workers have welcomed the improvements in the robustness of monitoring their work and the drive to improve the service. Social workers feel that there is now a shared commitment and responsibility between them and the management to ensure continual improvement. Social workers said that they feel that Merton is a safer place to work as a result of this. The panel chair confirmed this view by saying: 'There is a sense of renewed energy, I feel I have a voice that is heard now.' She went on to say, 'now the work is all about the children and adopters.'

There is a clear Statement of Purpose that sets out the aims and objective of the service and it is available to all. However, the address and contact details for Ofsted are not up to date. Overall the service operates in line with its statement. Children are informed about adoption and what it will mean for them through a range of means including age-appropriate written guides. However, the two children's guides do not contain the details of how children can contact their independent reviewing officer; this omission has little impact on children who either know their reviewing officer or are too young to make contact with them.

New arrangements for storage of adoption records are robust and offer a high degree of security. Records in current use are overall well maintained and securely stored to ensure their confidentiality. The premises are fit for purpose and provide a pleasant place both to work in and for service users to visit.

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 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for local authority adoption agencies.