

Committee: Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Date: July 3rd 2012

Agenda item: 8

Wards: All

Subject: Continuous Improvement of Adoption and Permanency Services in Merton

Lead officer: Theresa Leavy

Lead member: Cllr Maxi Martin

Forward Plan reference number:

Contact officer: Theresa Leavy

Recommendations:

- A. Members of the panel note the contents of the report
 - B. Members of the panel endorse the Improvement Action Plan
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1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1. We welcome the focus on improving outcomes for children in care as described within the publication of the government's Action Plan on Adoption¹ and the publication of the findings of the Expert Working Group².
- 1.2. We are keenly aware of the impact of delay on children and we share the government's determination to eliminate unnecessary delay in adoption and to make the adoption system in England the best in the world, in order to achieve better outcomes for children. Our performance in the recently published adoption scorecard describes a trajectory of improvement but over the three year period 2008-2011 placed us in a poor position both in London and nationally.
- 1.3. The *Action Plan on Adoption* supports our ambition to achieve a permanent family arrangement for all Merton children and in all cases in a timely manner. A council motion has been passed in 2011, with all party support, stating our commitment to speeding up the adoption process whilst ensuring we maintain robust assessment practise that secures the best families for children.
- 1.4. We will achieve this by ensuring our assessment activities for children and prospective permanent carers are delivered effectively and efficiently, by pursuing a range of permanency pathways, and for individual children, pursuing the pathway which best meets their unique needs.
- 1.5. We are equally committed to ensuring sustainable futures for your young people and are mindful of the significance of ensuring thoughtful and considered matching arrangements and in the provision of effective support post placement.

- 1.6. This paper will outline the extensive change agenda nationally in relation to the legislation, policy and systems in relation to children in care and adoption specifically. It will explore Merton's present performance in relation to the new adoption scorecard and describe the developments in place in relation to continuous service improvement of the Children, Schools and Families services in this area.

2 DETAILS

- 2.1. There has been a growing political interest and policy directive at a national level both in relation to both improving the processes, and the outcomes for children in care, particularly those waiting for a permanent family and the prospective carers of such children.
- 2.2. In support of this ambition a number of national reviews, policies and performance frameworks are converging:
- 2.3. **November 2010** Ministerial letter to all Director of Children's Services in England regarding adoption statistics, which showed significant variation in performance at a local level. The letter called on Directors of Children's Services and lead members to do everything possible to increase the number of children appropriately placed for adoption and to improve the speed with which decisions are made.
- 2.4. A comprehensive set of regulations and national minimum standards came into force on **April 1st 2011** for adoption and fostering services in England. New guidance on fostering and family and friends was also published and effective from the same date. These regulations revised the regulations of 2006 and 2002. They are partnered by the piloting of a new methodology of Ofsted inspection.
- 2.5. **November 2011** - The Family Justice Review published. It will be critical in helping to reduce delays. It describes a lamentable position across the country:
- 2.6. "*We found (sic):* a system that is not a system, characterised by mutual distrust and a lack of leadership, by incoherence and without solid evidence based knowledge about how it really works. The consequence for children is unconscionable delay that has continued to increase since we began our work. The **average** care case in county courts now takes over 60 weeks and many take much longer – an age in the life of a child. These delays contribute to the 2 years 7 months it takes on average for a child to be adopted. With 20,000 children now waiting for a decision, delay is likely to rise further". The review described the need for
- Stronger leadership and coordination of the organisations and people involved in family cases including structural changes to achieve this.
 - Changes in legislation, regulations and processes in public law aimed at putting the needs of children first and with tighter attribution of responsibility to the array of people involved in a case.
- 2.7. **December 2011** - Children in Care and Adoption Performance Tables published.

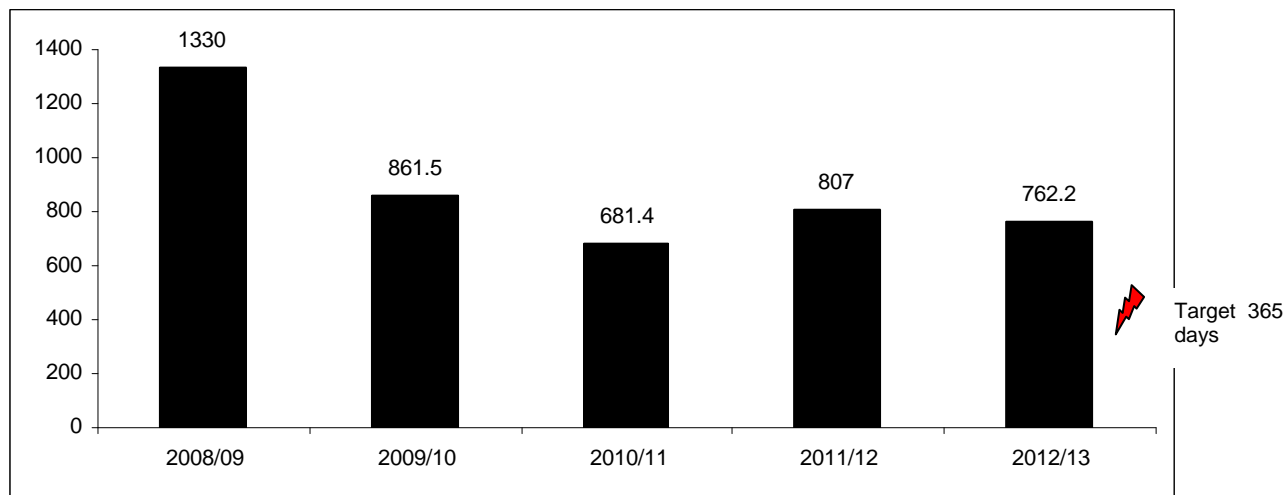
- 2.8. **December 2011** the Expert Working Group on Adoption, was established and commissioned by the Coalition Government to urgently review the operation of adoption in England.
- 2.9. **December 2011** Ofsted framework for inspection
- Local Authorities should achieve 12-month time limit from care plan decision to adoption placement for services to be rated 'outstanding'.
- 2.10. **March 2012** publication of Expert Working Group on Adoption report "*Redesigning Adoption*" and *the ministerial report An Action Plan for Adoption - Tackling Delay*. Recommendations
- New legal duties on local authorities to reduce delays for children and for prospective adopters
 - A focus on concurrent planning -proposed changes to legislation will make it easier for children to be fostered by approved prospective adopters while the courts consider the case for adoption.
 - Introducing the Adoption Gateway as a new national "front door" for prospective adopters to supplement but not replace local agency access points
 - Re-designing the adoption application process into two distinct but fluent stages
 - Streamlining assessment forms and guidance to allow for more focussed and confident assessment reports without compromising on quality
 - Establishing a tougher target that in most cases the application process would take no more than six months to complete
 - Allowing that for some applicants, such as second time adopters or foster carers, these processes can be further "fast-tracked"
 - Ensuring that all children with a plan for adoption and all approved adopters are referred to and go live on the national adoption register after three months to maximise their chances of a match
 - Introducing charging for step-parent adopters
 - Substantially improving post-adoption support through the introduction of stronger minimum standards and the concept of an "Adoption Passport"
- 2.11. It is clear that improving the lives of children in care is a national priority. If more children are to be provided with (much more quickly) stable, loving and permanent homes, and for this to be through adoption where this is in their best interests, there is an increasing understanding that the adoption system needs to work much more effectively and efficiently, and in all likelihood requires systemic overhaul.
- 2.12. Nationally the average time between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family is one year and nine months. For some groups, especially black children, this can be as much as twice this timeline. But at the local level there has been very variable performance. For example, in 2009-10 the percentage of children in care being adopted ranged from 2% to 16% with a 12% mean average. The figures for Merton expressed as a three year average are 5%.

- 2.13. There is currently a mismatch nationally and locally between the supply of prospective adopters and the demand of children requiring adoption. For example, there are numerous sibling groups that agencies are unable to place, children with disabilities and other long-term conditions also struggle to find adoptive families.
- 2.14. Nationally there are currently 372 sibling groups of 2 on the Adoption Register but only 78 adoptive families active on the Register and approved for 2 children. At the same time, there are 75 sibling groups of 3 or more children active on the Register but only 3 adoptive families approved for 3 children.
- 2.15. Evidence in the study of children not found an adoptive family Selwyn's(10) clearly described that for non-infant adoptions 20% of those with adoption recommendations were never placed. There was further significant evidence that the likely outcome for children not to be placed were white children 17%, 30% of mixed ethnicity, 58% of black children and 64% of Asian children.
- 2.16. Given the current mismatch, there is a demonstrable need to maintain and enhance the number of enquirers coming forwards interested in Adoption. The principal task is the generation of more and relevant and informed enquiries.
- 2.17. **The Adoption Score Card and Performance report**
- 2.18. The activity rate for adoption and Special Guardianship Orders (SGO's) in Merton for the past three years:

	Adoptions	SGO's	Total
2008/09	5	5	10
2009/10	2	6	8
2010/11	5	5	10
2011/12	9	3	12

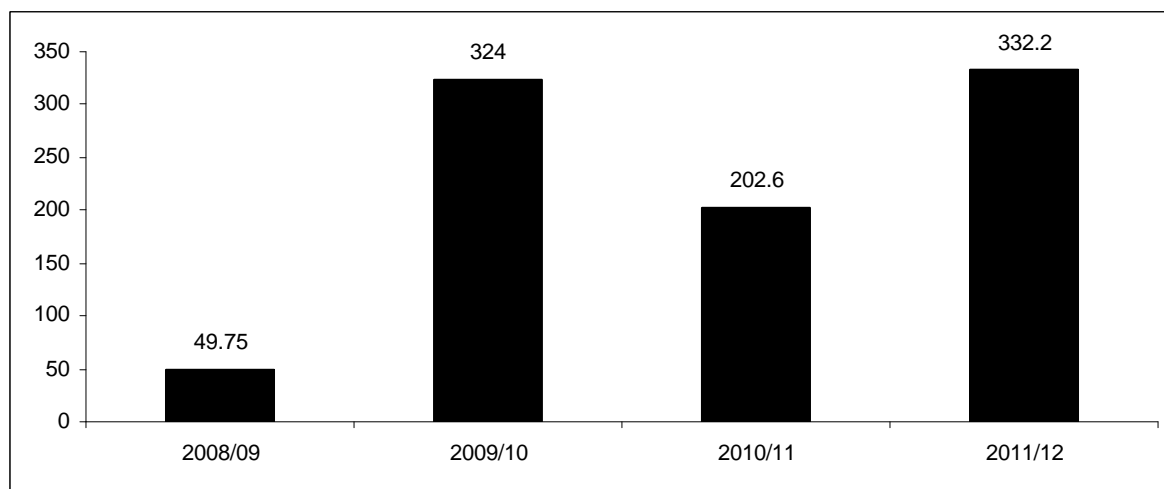
- 2.19. Nationally the three year average for SGO's was 6%, Merton shows a three year average of 7%.
- 2.20. The Adoption Score Card is broadly designed to describe, across a three year period, the timeliness for children for whom adoption was the outcome and the timeliness of prospective adopters approval processes. The timeliness for Prospective adopters will not be published until 2014. However the target for timeliness is now shortened from eight month to six months from initial enquiry to approval. The action plan will target improvements in this area where presently the average timescale is outside of the 8 months performance target.

A1 INDICATOR - Average time between a child becoming looked after care and moving in with its adoptive family, for children who have been adopted.



2.21. In summary Merton's position improved from 1330 days to 681 between 2008 and 2011. Our 2011/12 figure shows an increase to 807 days with the national average standing at 625 days. The figure published is the three year average figure of **957 days** this is against an England average of 625. Already in this year there have been placements of children with highly complex needs that have seen a timeline outside of the target. It is anticipated that other children placed across the year will have shorter timelines

2.22. **A2 INDICATOR** Average Time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family.



- 2.23. This indicator is particularly designed to distinguish between the reasons for delay performance is more variable due to our low numbers. The average **Length of Care proceedings Indicator** shows the Merton average was 61 weeks, compared with a national average of 52 weeks

Number of Children Awaiting - At March 31st 2011, Merton had 13 Children with a plan for adoption.

Summary

- 2.24. The *Action Plan for Adoption* outlines a redesigned adoption system that could, subject to effective implementation, lead to a more efficient, transparent system which matches the supply of potential adopters more effectively with the needs of children in need of adoption.
- 2.25. Merton's low numbers of children in care can pose a challenge when looking at small percentage activity, today's Looked after Children population numbers 127, with many of these children being well settled and stable in long term foster care placements for whom adoption would not be the best plan.
- 2.26. It is our intention that all children who cannot conceivably be seen to be safely returned to their birth families will be living in a permanent placement within 18 months of becoming looked after. This will not always suitably be an adoptive placement but may be through the means of a special Guardianship Order or permanent foster care. Neither of these mechanisms feature within the adoption scorecard but clearly do provide secure and loving permanent families for our children.
- 2.27. In acknowledgment of the need to improve timeliness both for adopters and for our children and mindful of, the Governments consultation on changes to the legislation later this year and in light of the implementation of the Family Justice Review recommendations, we are making a range of improvements and changes to our internal systems and processes to assist us in minimising delay and maximizing the best matches, these changes are laid out in the accompanying Adoption Improvement Action plan. Our plan has been reviewed by BAAF who are experts in the field and who are advising nationally on the implementation of the national improvements required.

3 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 3.1. None for the purposes of this report

4 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

- 4.1. Wide-scale consultation has been undertaken with staff across all services to develop the improvement action plan.

5 TIMETABLE

- 5.1. (See Action Plan)

6 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1. The new regulations in September will contain new requirements, the financial implications of those will need to be met within the service.

7 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

7.1. See body of report

8 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

8.1. These services potentially affect all aspects of our communities

9 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

9.1. None for the purposes of this report

10 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

10.1. None for the purposes of this report

11 APPENDICES – THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS ARE TO BE PUBLISHED WITH THIS REPORT AND FORM PART OF THE REPORT

- Adoption Improvement Action Plan

12 BACKGROUND PAPERS

12.1. *Action Plan on Adoption Dfe*

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Action Plan for Improving Permanency in Merton

Priority Number	Priority Area for Action	Activities	Lead Officer	Timescale	Commentary
1.	Ensure consistent and relentless corporate parenting and oversight by Elected Members and senior officers.	Maintain and continuously improve the oversight and strategic direction provided by the Corporate Parenting Executive – through a refresh of the performance data and agenda planning with a strong focus on permanency for LAC.	Director for Adult Services Chair of CPE	Review March 2013	The Ofsted inspection 2012 noted the Corporate Parenting Strategic Governance Group is clear about its priorities of achieving placement stability and permanence for children and young people and includes a range of agencies and cross party elected members.
		Provide additional senior leadership support and oversight through the deployment of DMT champions for individual children for whom adoption is the plan.	Head of Service CSC and YI	May 2012	Each member of DMT is undertaking to 'sponsor' children and the team around the child to ensure that the commitment to achieving permanency for children is displayed throughout the organization.
		A scrutiny Task and Finish group will consider the field of stability and achieving permanency for LAC	Head of Service CSC and YI	March 2013	

Action Plan for Improving Permanency in Merton

		as part of its 2012/13 work plan	Head of Service CSC and YI	September 2012	We presently have two elected members on the central list
	Priority Area for Action	Activities	Lead Officer	Timescale	Commentary
2.	Ensure the structures and management personnel deployed within the service meet the needs of the continuous improvement programme and provide secure and effective leadership.	<p>Restructure the management roles and responsibilities across adoption and quality assurance.</p> <p>Review the job roles and caseload functions of all staff within the fostering and adoption teams and clarify both the location of the range of assessment and family finding functions and workloads parameters.</p> <p>This will include a clear and potentially</p>	Head of Service CSC and YI	September 2012.	See Restructure plan documentation.

Action Plan for Improving Permanency in Merton

		enhanced focus on the area of post adoption support and family & friends care.				
	Priority Area for Action	Activities	Lead Officer	Timescale	Commentary	
3.	Ensure all staff across the service teams are well trained with a sound grounding in the research base for adoption and permanency and have the necessary skill set to deliver effective parallel planning, work with birth parents and have sound assessment skills.	Work further with BAAF colleagues to deliver effective and well researched training and development programmes for all staff involved in permanency work.	Service Managers LAC and Quality Assurance	Work already underway complete December 2012	We have a range of effective training programmes already in place Ofsted 2012 noted - Effective workforce planning has led to specific training for social workers in association with BAAF, and much improved training for foster carers, resulting in a more skilled and capable workforce.	
	Priority Area for Action	Activities	Lead Officer	Timescale	Commentary	
4.	Deliver on Review of Fostering and Adoption Panel to ensure the new	Integrate the two panels and central lists and request the adoption panel chair	Head of Service CSC and YI	September 2012	We have reviewed both the fostering and adoption panel in Merton and produced a	

Action Plan for Improving Permanency in Merton

	<p>integrated panel provides robust and rigorous service and challenge</p>	<p>remain the Chair of the integrated panel and draw upon the chair and vice chair of the fostering panel to be vice chairs of the integrated panel. Constitute the panel to meet both sets of regulations.</p> <p>Organise and deliver training for the members of the Central list to ensure they can support and deliver on the new agenda.</p> <p>Ensure Panel are provided with relevant and timely quality assurance information in order to support the monitoring and improvement on timescales for children</p>	<p>Service Manager LAC Permanency & Placements</p>	<p>Throughout the year – training plan in place Sept 2012</p>	<p>projected forward plan for both for 2012-2013. Both panels have at times had a light agenda – this is partly due to the essentially small numbers of children and prospective carers in Merton and due, to some greater of lesser degree, in loose report scheduling and agenda planning.</p>
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Action Plan for Improving Permanency in Merton

			and prospective adopters and foster carers.	QA Lead Permanency	May 2012 and monthly thereafter	
			In accordance with NHS Panel Chair to be supported to produce six monthly reports which incorporate quantitative and qualitative information, user feedback and recommendations for improvement.	Lead Officer	Timescale	Commentary
5.	Maintain and further develop the effective working relationship within the South West London Adoption Consortium	As Chair of the SW London Adoption Consortium we are leading discussions on the development of family finding "adoption activity days" attended by adopters and children.	Greater prominence of shared information	Team Manager Adoption	July 2012	We have good partnership relationships with other LA members of the South West London Adoption Consortium including exchanges of information on children and adopters and achieving inter agency adoption placements. We will build on these good relationships and

Action Plan for Improving Permanency in Merton

		evenings of recruitment activity to promote better collaboration.			further improve our partnership work with the voluntary adoption agency within the Consortium. The Consortium LA's are subscribing authorities to 'New Families Social' support agency for LGBT Adopters and Foster Carers.
	Priority Area for Action	Activities	Lead Officer	Timescale	Commentary
6.	Ensure that our processes and procedures achieve Prompt Plans for permanency through robust parallel planning and systematic case work with Looked after Children	The Adoption and Permanence team to be involved at the earliest opportunity in the planning for a child through early notification being established from IRO service to Adoption Service in any case where adoption may be the plan and in all cases where any child is under 5 years of age.	Service Manager Looked after Children	May 2012	Early notification needs to be established to reduce delay

Action Plan for Improving Permanency in Merton

		<p>By the second review permanency must have been discussed and a plan agreed with the IRO and the Adoption and Permanence team to be present at the second review.</p> <p>Monthly Tracking meeting to continue to involve legal team, A&P and Child's LAC / CIN team and to be chaired by New QA post holder.</p> <p>Permanency Planning meetings to be convened within a month of the LAC Review that identifies adoption as a possible permanency outcome.</p>		<p>May 2012</p> <p>Compliance Monitor report to DMT Sept 2012</p> <p>Minutes of Monthly tracking Meeting to be audited by Head of Service. June 2012</p>	<p>Invitation of permanency workers to second review to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ ensure parallel planning support ✓ adoption support plan discussion ✓ agree work with birth family. <p>The additional capacity within the QA service will provide a substantially robust and offline QA function to the Tracking process.</p> <p>Support child's Social Worker to schedule tasks simultaneously and alert other teams to assessments and/or family finding.</p>
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Action Plan for Improving Permanency in Merton

	Priority Area for Action	Activities	Lead Officer	Timescale	Commentary
7.	<p>Ensure processes across the services support effective permanency work</p>	<p>Enhance the level of service provision within the Family Group Conferencing service to ensure all children who are at the edge of care and those becoming looked after are considered for a FGC.</p> <p>Ensure that family finding profiles for children are not limiting in terms of culture or race but seek to identify families who can best meet all or most of the needs of the child.</p> <p>In meeting with the court user group identify and rectify any issues that are</p>	<p>Service Manager Access and Assessment and CIN</p> <p>Service Manager Looked after Children</p> <p>Head of Service CSC and Y1</p>	<p>September 2012</p> <p>Implemented</p> <p>Ongoing</p>	<p>Financial package of additional 50 k agreed in May 2012</p> <p>Reduces delay in identifying potential families and offers the most current full information about the child's characteristics, personality and attributes. This includes where possible the voice of the child.</p> <p>The court delay issues are well understood and an agreed action plan will be</p>

Action Plan for Improving Permanency in Merton

		contributing to delay within the court arena. Develop leaflet specifically on Birth Parent Support Services. Adoption Support Workers to visit childcare teams to talk about what work they can offer.		Sept 2012	implemented. Social Workers are helped to fully appreciate the value of birth parents engaging with adoption support services at an early stage.
	Priority Area for Action	Activities	Lead Officer	Timescale	Commentary
8.	Review and Refresh our policies and procedures in light of the changes nationally and locally and ensure we have one clear permanency policy that incorporates the range and scope of placement opportunities with family and friends carers.	BAAF have been commissioned to work with staff on workshop'ing the implementation of the permanency policy and developing Merton specific procedures. Commission external provider to make available electronically and agree updating	Service Manager LAC Permanency & Placements	September 2012	BAAF's initial feedback from the diagnostics work May 2012 stated that the policies are largely sound and require some integration and embedding with staff. The outcome from BAAF's recent Adoption & Fostering Consultancy

Action Plan for Improving Permanency in Merton

	Priority Area for Action	Activities	Lead Officer	Timescale	Commentary
9.	<p>Ensure our assessment processes and formats are effective and drive an increased pace in assessment activity</p>	<p>Ensure the assessment capacity of the A&P Team is sufficient to produce PARs of a high quality and in a timely manner.</p> <p>Ensure the assessment capacity to respond to all viability assessments of proposed SGO placements does not adversely impinge on the above activity.</p>	Service Manager LAC	September 2012	<p>highlighted a number of gaps particularly in regards to our family and friends policy, Special Guardianship, Policy & Planning for Permanence Policy that requires updating, cross referencing and then embedding with staff in their practice.</p> <p>We will frontload the assessment process and will reduce timescale for overall assessment by information gathering at the earliest opportunity.</p> <p>By removing the responsibility for short timescale activity, the team can return to prioritising adopter assessments and activity. A decision will be needed as to how</p>

Action Plan for Improving Permanency in Merton

		<p>Written agreements with prospective adopters will include the Merton Adoption Charter.</p> <p>Applicants will receive the Merton Adopters Self-Assessment questionnaire at same time as the Adoption Application Form when the offer of assessment is made.</p> <p>Assign lead responsibility duties to individual adoption workers.</p> <p>Assessment activity for short term carers who want to offer permanence to be undertaken by ART.</p>			<p>and where the expertise will be relocated.</p> <p>Promote accountability and expertise in the Family Finding and information and preparation of Adopters domains.</p> <p>We already use the BAAF guidance on making good adoption assessments to create a self-assessment questionnaire for the adopters' use during assessment, which we will use pending the government's development of a national model for this.</p>
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Action Plan for Improving Permanency in Merton

	Priority Area for Action	Activities	Lead Officer	Timescale	Commentary
10.	Ensure the supply of prospective adopters is maximised and in a pace that meets the needs of children whilst maintaining a high quality assessment outcome	<p>We will promote new foster carers adopting, including supporting their use of non-urgency routes to avoid delay and the creative use of support plans, thereby reducing the number of moves a child has where possible.</p> <p>Facilitate the assessment of second time adopters by updating the original PAR thus reducing delay in the process.</p> <p>Encourage and support foster carers who wish to adopt to apply directly to the court if the child has been with them for more than a year.</p>	<p>Service Manager LAC Permanency & Placements</p> <p>Adoption Team Manager</p> <p>Adoption Team Manager</p>	<p>September 2012</p> <p>Implemented</p> <p>Implemented</p>	<p>A number of processes and procedures have been Improved in the past 18 months as part of both the LEAN review, Work of the consortium and the service response to the Adoption Action Plan.</p>

Action Plan for Improving Permanency in Merton

		<p>Develop a system for prioritising applications in conjunction with recognising and predicting children coming through.</p> <p>Incorporate adopters specific support needs in the PAR, to enable applicants to apply in the knowledge of the support they are likely to require/receive.</p>	Adoption Team Manager	August 2012	<p>Implemented</p> <p>This will link to the development of the "Adopter's Passport" regarding guaranteed support.</p>
	Priority Area for Action		Lead Officer	Timescale	Commentary
11.	Ensure the recruitment of concurrent carers and prospective adoptive carers is efficient, of a high quality and sufficiently speedy.	<p>Continue to embed closer working partnership with Communications Team recruitment officer as well as Information & Publicity Officer in the team and update recruitment strategy for 2012.</p>	Service Manager (ART) and Service Manager LAC	September 2012	<p>Positive use of media in family finding including our use of DVD's of children and profiles has received good feedback. We will develop and promote this to ensure a wider reflection of the views of the child wherever possible and in an age appropriate way.</p>

Action Plan for Improving Permanency in Merton

			Ensure details about available support packages are widely publicised at all stages of the prospective adopter's journey.		
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