

Committee: Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Date: 16 April 2013

Agenda item: 6

Wards: All

Subject: Inspection Reports and Action Plan for Fostering and Adoption services

Lead officer: Theresa Leavy

Lead member: Councillor Maxi Martin,

Forward Plan reference number: N/A

Contact officer: Sheila Caie

Recommendations:

- A. Note outcomes of both inspections.
 - B. Comment on Action Plans
-

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1. To provide children and young people overview and scrutiny panel with a report on the two regulated service areas of Fostering and Adoption following regulatory inspections conducted by Ofsted in the last quarter. To share details of the action plans in place to respond to areas for further development.

2 DETAILS

- 2.1. The Fostering Inspection report was published in the first quarter of this year. The Fostering Service provides short and long-term foster placements for children and young people aged from birth to 18 years old. The day-to-day management of the service is the responsibility of the fostering team manager. The access to resources team (ART) undertakes the recruitment and assessment of prospective carers. At the time of inspection we were working with 44 approved foster carer households and 84 children and young people placed with them.
- 2.2. The fostering service was judged as effective and good overall. Ofsted found children and young people are able to make good progress in relation to their starting points across all aspects of their care and effective arrangements were in place to support this. Children and young people have positive views about their care and their relationships with foster carers. Foster carers reported receiving supervision and support and were able to demonstrate a good understanding of children and young people's needs. Children and young people were actively engaged in plans that are made for them and reported feeling able to influence the service through the children in care council and other groups. The report found that leaders and

managers were committed to fostering, were insightful of the strengths and weaknesses of the service and have put in measures to improve it.

- 2.3. The inspection team made five recommendations for areas for improvement which are detailed within the appended action plan.
- 2.4. The adoption service was inspected in February 2013 at the time of the inspection we had 14 children who had adoption as their plan, eight of whom had been placed in their proposed adoptive placement. There were 12 approved adopters, four of whom had children placed with them. The adoption agency 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.
- 2.5. Ofsted found that overall the adoption agency provides an effective service to all affected by adoption and the overall outcome was Good. The full report highlighted many areas of good practise; *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.*
- 2.6. The report clearly identifies that the adoption scorecard published last year highlighted the historical poor timescale issues the service had delivered. It however comments that yet to be published performance shows substantial improvement across all areas. The inspection team made five recommendations for areas for improvement which are detailed within the appended action plan.

3 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 3.1. Elected members are required by statutory guidance to be informed of the functioning of these regulated services.

4 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

- 4.1. A range of stakeholders have been involved in the inspections and completing the action plans.

5 TIMETABLE

- 5.1. N/A

6 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1. None

7 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1. None

8 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1.

9 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1. None

10 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

10.1. None

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

- London Borough of Merton Adoption Service Ofsted Inspection report for local authority adoption agency
- London Borough of Merton Fostering Service Ofsted Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

12 BACKGROUND PAPERS

12.1.

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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.

London Borough of Merton Fostering Services

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC042200
Inspection date	20/11/2012
Inspector	Karen Malcolm / Caroline Wilson
Type of inspection	Full

Setting address	London Borough of Merton, Merton Civic Centre, London Road, MORDEN, Surrey, SM4 5DX
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Registered person	London Borough of Merton
Registered manager	Sadi Atim
Responsible individual	Sheila Caie
Date of last inspection	08/09/2008

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Merton Fostering Service is a local authority service that provides short and long-term foster placements for children and young people aged from birth to 18 years old. The day-to-day management of the service is the responsibility of the fostering team manager. The access to resources team (ART) undertaken the recruitment and assessment of prospective carers'.

Both teams involved in the fostering service work together. At present there are 44 approved foster carers and 84 children and young people 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**.

The fostering service is effective. Children and young people are able to make good progress in relation to their starting points across all aspects of their care and effective arrangements are in place to support this. Children and young people have positive views about their care and their relationships with foster carers.

Foster carers receive supervision and support and they were able to demonstrate a **good understanding of children and young people's needs**. Children and young people are actively engaged in plans that are made for them. They have been able to influence the service through the children in care council and other groups.

The fostering team is stable. They are all appropriately experienced and qualified. Foster carers maintain good working relationships with the service and support is provided to the whole fostering family.

The leaders and managers are committed to fostering. They have an insightful understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the service and have put in measures to improve it. Shortfalls identified during this inspection relate to monitoring undertaken by the fostering manager, training for foster carers and recruitment checks for panel members.

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 all foster carers receive training in positive care and control of children, including training in physical intervention for all ages. The behaviour policy should clearly set out how physical intervention should or not be used by a carer (NMS3.8)
- ensure that a record is kept of the recruitment and suitability checks which have been carried out for foster carers and those working (including as volunteers), for the fostering service. This relates specifically to the recruitment of panel members (NMS 19.3)
- ensure that support and training is made available to foster carers, including hard-to-reach carers, to assist them in meeting the specific needs of the children they are caring for or are expected to care for. This is in relation to refresher training courses and when concerns are raised with regards to standards of care (NMS20.8)
- ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to **ensure compliance with the service's policies, to identify any** concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Ensure that immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring, this is in relation to case files (NMS 25.2)
- ensure that the management committee members receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the fostering service every 3 months; (a) monitor the management and outcomes of the services in order to satisfy themselves that the service is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children; (b) satisfy themselves that the provider is complying with the conditions of registration. (NMS 25.7).

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Children and young people are supported to take risks that are proportionate to their age and understanding. They are able to make and sustain relationships with their friends and participate in sports and outdoor activities without excessive constraints, in accordance with appropriate risk assessments.

Children and young people enjoy contact with family and friends, when it is safe to do so. Contact arrangements for children and young people enable them to reinforce, sustain and create links with their birth families. Contact takes place in a safe environment and may be supervised so that it is constructive and safeguards

children and young people's welfare.

Children and young people's health needs are well met. A number of services are in place which promote their physical and emotional well-being. Foster carers have prompt and direct contact with health professionals, including a registered general nurse and a psychologist. The input of the psychologist has promoted placement stability as well as providing foster carers with insight on how to manage challenging behaviours effectively. Children and young people with specific health needs and/or disabilities enjoy specialist, individualised care which meets their overall health needs. Children and young people have access to additional health care checks to monitor whether they are meeting their developmental milestones, so that they can reach their full potential.

Children and young people have a good understanding of how to live healthy lifestyles. They are involved in leisure activities within their local community, which promotes their self-esteem as well as providing them with an enjoyable way of keeping good physical health.

Children and young people are supported to achieve to the best of their ability in respect of their education. Pre-school children have access to support that stimulates their learning through play. This ensures that they are not at a disadvantage when it **is time for them to go to school. Children and young people's enjoy consistent school placements**, as changes in school are minimised as far as reasonably practical. Young people are supported to attend education through to university. They are provided with support to fulfil their maximum educational potential and overcome any **challenges that they may face. This includes their attendance at 'taster days' at further educational establishments and additional support in the classroom. Young people's school attendance, punctuality and exam results have steadily improved** over the years. These matters are overseen by the virtual headteacher and remedial **steps taken to address any barriers that are affecting children and young people's ability to achieve the highest educational standards that they possibly can.**

Children and young people are actively involved in the running of the foster service and decision making process. They take part in the recruitment of potential foster carers because they have a good understanding of the needs of children in foster care. Young people express their views about the care that they receive through their involvement in the children in care council. Here, they can also contribute their views at strategic level and have been involved in reviewing literature that is being promoted within the fostering service.

Young people learn a wide range of life skills that will enable them to live successfully in the community. Formal planning from a young age provides them with more opportunity to develop essential life skills. Young people need to demonstrate that they have sufficient understanding of the practical, social and emotional impact of living alone. They are supported in this by their foster carers and by training sessions that are facilitated by the 14 Plus team. This input has led to positive outcomes in young people maintaining individual tenancies. Young people **also have the option of remaining in their former fostering home under 'staying put'**

arrangements. This offers a transition to independence similar to that which is experienced by most other young people.

Quality of service

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

The recruitment and retention of foster carers is sufficient for the fostering service. The arrangements for the recruitment of foster carers are robust. Foster carers say that the assessment process is positive and they receive good induction, support and training. Experienced carers are involved in the initial training to enable applicants to have a good insight about foster care and other training provided. There is a clear and robust recruit strategy aimed at obtaining skilled foster carers who can provide specialised care to children with complex challenging needs, sibling groups and specific cultural needs. The introduction of the access to resources team has enabled the process of recruitment and assessment of foster carers to be completed within **the service's timescale. Foster carers talk positively about the responsive, reliable support from the service. Experienced foster carers act as 'buddies' for new carers to offer additional support.**

The matching process ensures that children and young people are placed with foster carers who have the skills and backgrounds to provide care that is unique to **children's needs. Where this support is not fully met, additional support is** provided by other professionals. This is regularly reviewed.

Information given to the foster carer about the child has improved. Some foster carers did say that they did not feel that all the necessary information about the child is always available at the beginning of a placement. However, within five days this is in place. The team manager and social workers all said this has improved. Foster carers understand that some placements, for example, emergency placements may result in limited information being available, but support is in place for the child.

Foster carers are positive about the quality of support they receive from supervising social workers. Most rate this as excellent too good. This is through regular supervision, which is always available. They are given the opportunity to undertake further on-going training, if they so wish. Foster carers all say they are supported by dedicated social workers and other professionals who put children and young people at the centre of what they do. One foster carer said 'I like working for Merton; the support is brilliant and I have made new friends. This statement was reiterated by other carers.

Approved foster carers are integral members of the professional working team. Their opinions and views are taken into account and acted upon. Foster carers said that their support has improved, the change being spearheaded by the team manager, who supports and enables them to understand their roles. They also made comments that the fostering service recognises and supports their whole family. There is also a fostering forum where carers can raise issues to be taken forward. Foster carers also receive newsletters to enable information to be shared effectively.

The training programme for foster carers covers most of the core training. Training can be tailored to the needs of the individual children and young people to support the carer. For example, training has been provided to carers who care for children with complex health needs or behavioural issues. However, positive care and control of children which includes physical intervention is not part of the training programme provided to all carers. Carers are also supported to access external training courses.

All foster carers have or are working towards the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) training standards in foster care. New carers are expected to undertake the CWDC standards. Training is discussed at the annual review, but refresher courses and follow-up training is not consistently managed.

The organisation has recently reviewed the fostering panel along with the adoption panel. This was completed through consultation and working alongside British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering. The panel was reformed as a joint pilot panel that is to be reviewed in January 2013. All panel members on the central list have a good range of experience and expertise to help them consider carers' approvals and relevant annual reviews. Cases are dealt with thoroughly and discussion is child-focused, with an emphasis on safeguarding and equality and diversity. The panel provides feedback to the agency decision maker, for example, if there are any quality assurance issues. Part of an applicant's assessment to become carers is that they are invited to attend the panel and are given the opportunity to present their views on the process. This is followed up in their annual reviews. However, personnel information pertaining to individuals' panel members' identification, qualifications and references was missing from some files.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Children and young people are protected by robust safeguarding practices and incidents of bullying are minimal. Foster carers understand the potential impact of abuse on children and young people. They are fully aware of the procedures to protect them and this is enhanced by the training they attend. The numbers of allegations against foster carers are low and investigations are thorough. Approvals are reviewed at panel. There have been six allegations made against foster carers since the beginning of 2012. The theme of the majority of allegations or complaints against foster carers relates to actions of physical intervention. Links with the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) facilitate informal dialogue about any concerns the service may have, ensuring that children's interests are safeguarded. Training and written guidance is provided for foster carers and updated information on safeguarding is provided. However, following an allegation or complaint and where standards of care may have been a matter of concern, actions are then set. However, this practice is not consistently followed up with the carer. Therefore, it is unclear whether lessons have been learnt.

Complaints are generally dealt with before reaching the formal stage. The children's

guide includes contact numbers of other organisations, such as Ofsted. All children spoken said that if they have a complaint or a concern they would go to their foster carer or social worker first.

Robust practice minimises the number of times that children and young people go missing. Over a course of a year eight children and young people had gone missing a total of 15 occasions. The fostering service has a clear overview on why incidents occur and each child and young person has an appropriate risk management plan to ensure that they remain safe. Foster carers gave examples of how they respond to children and young person when they go missing or are absent without permission. Where the need is great, a charity working to support children and young people through trauma, loss and bereavement is used to support those children and young people who persistently go missing.

Recruitment and vetting of staff and foster carers is undertaken robustly. Records are held electronically or on paper files. The fostering panel follows up with social workers any outstanding concerns about foster carer suitability checks, to ensure that children are safeguarded. Unannounced visits to foster carers take place at least annually and also, whenever there are concerns about safety or safe care practice. These visits are recorded on foster carers' annual reviews, which enables the panel to monitor that they take place and are effective. As a result, children and young people are protected.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the local authority fostering agency are **adequate**.

The fostering management team has an overview of the strengths and weakness of the service. However, this is not formulated through quarterly reports as required. This detracts from strategic oversight of the service. Similarly, this year, five complaints, allegations and standards of care issues were made against carers and were investigated by the service. Although, each concern was addressed and followed safeguarding guidance, there is little recorded evidence of what strategies had been put in place as a consequence.

The management team has developed various monitoring strategies and there is an emphasis on continuous development and learning. One of the areas identified for improvement related to case files. An audit was undertaken and an action plan address where improvement could be made. However, the monitoring of this has not been consistent, for example some case files did not have a robust chronological report of events such as exemptions, or if variation changes took place. The Statement of Purpose is comprehensive and provides well written information **about the fostering service and the services it provides. The children's guide is produced in two formats and is very informative and age appropriate.**

Reviews are timely and children and young people **are seen regularly. Children's rights are actively promoted and children and young people are well supported by**

various activities. There is clear evidence where children and young people have influenced and contributed to the development of the fostering service, mainly through the children in care council and various other groups. The corporate parenting committee is also committed to listening to the views of looked-after children and care leavers. They have produced an annual report which shows what has been achieved and where further improvements can be made.

The recommendations from the last inspection have been complied with. These were: to ensure that all carers have information on how to support all the children in their care and the payment structure for all carers is to be fair and comparable across the service.

The friends and family service is a small part of the service and carers are integrated into the fostering service.

The service has established the dedicated functions of recruitment and assessment in the access to resources team. The majority of looked-after children are placed within fostering. The access to resources team has improved the quality assurance of external commissioning, through the extensive investment in this service. The service has focused on continually improving on stability in placements both internal and externally.

Both teams involved in the fostering service work together to ensure a seamless transfer of cases and to ensure that good placement decisions are made. There is a clear strategy plan on recruitment. The current demand is for placements for teenagers with complex behavioural needs and sibling groups. The fostering service has maintained positive relationships within the teams and with external partners. There are positive links with other professionals and all staff spoken to said that having the teams located within the same building has improved communication.

Foster carers, children and young people are supported by a sufficient number of competent social work and administrative staff. Staff are appropriately experienced and qualified and any professional development is promoted by the service. Staff are supported appropriately by regular team meetings, individual supervision and appraisals. Staff spoken to were very clear on what has improved for children and young people and where improvements can be made to enhance the service.

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 fostering agencies.

No	Areas for improvement	How was this area identified /evidenced	Action and where this action is embedded	By when	Accountable lead / Delivering lead	Measure of success and audit	RAG rating
Overall effectiveness: Judged to be GOOD as at February 2013							
Outcomes for children and young people: Judged to be GOOD as at February 2013							
	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).	Adoption Inspection Areas for Improvement Feb 2013	Ensure cross departmental process by which the statutory review where adoption is identified as the permanence plan is clearly tracked to ensure the Agency Decision Maker can make a decision about whether the child should be placed for adoption within two months of that review.	April 2013 Ongoing	SM Permanency Placements and LAC / SM Safeguards, Standards and Training	1. Reduced timescales for progressing care plans for children with a permanence plan of adoption. 2. Quarterly DfE Adoption Survey 3. Six monthly Panel Chair's Report. 4. Quarterly IRO Meeting with Agency Decision Maker	G
Quality of Service Provision: Judged to be ADEQUATE as at February 2013							
1	Ensure that 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).	Adoption Inspection Areas for Improvement Feb 2013	Ensure all pre-application criteria have been met by prospective adopters before they make their formal application.	April 2013 Ongoing	Adoption Team Manager	1. Timescales for adopters' assessments improve. 2. Reduction in the number of prospective adopters who do not complete the assessment process.	G
2	Improve the information provided to birth parents about the support available to them (NMS 12.4)	Adoption Inspection Areas for Improvement Feb 2013	Ensure prospective adopters are closely tracked and presented to the adoption panel for a recommendation of their suitability to adopt within eight months of their formal application.		SM Permanency Placements and LAC / SM Safeguards, Standards and Training	1. Timescales for adopters' assessments improve. 2. Quarterly DfE Adoption Survey 3. Six monthly Panel Chair's Report. 4. Forward Plan tracks prospective adopters' progression to Panel.	G
			Amend information provided to birth parents to ensure it clearly identifies the support available to them and helps them understand why decisions were taken to remove their children and the arrangements for ongoing contact.	June 2013	Adoption Team Manager	1. Improved take up of service by birth parents. 2. Increased attendance at consortium support groups.	G
Safeguarding children and young people: Judged to be GOOD as at February 2013							
3	No areas for improvement identified by Inspection.						
Leadership and management: Judged to be GOOD as at February 2013							
4	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).	Adoption Inspection Areas for Improvement Feb 2013	Amend the statement of purpose to include current address and telephone number for Ofsted.	Apr-13	Adoption Team Manager	Amended Statement of Purpose uploaded on intranet and internet.	G
5	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).	Adoption Inspection Areas for Improvement Feb 2013	1. Amend the guides for children to include information about how they can contact their independent reviewing officer. 2. Amend the guides for children to include the current address and contact details for Ofsted and the Children's Rights Director.	Apr-13	Adoption Team Manager	1. Amended Children's Guides produced and given to children currently accessing the service. 2. Amended Children's Guides uploaded on the intranet and internet.	G

No	Areas for improvement	How was this area identified /evidenced	Action and where this action is embedded	By when	Accountable lead / Delivering lead	Measure of success and audit	RAG rating
Overall effectiveness: Judged to be GOOD as at November 2012							
Outcomes for children and young people: Judged to be GOOD as at November 2012							
	No areas for improvement identified by inspection						
Quality of Service Provision: Judged to be GOOD as at November 2012							
1	Ensure that all foster carers receive training in positive care and control of children, including training in physical intervention for all ages. The behaviour policy should clearly set out how physical intervention should or not be used by a carer (NMS3.8)	Fostering inspection Areas for Improvement Nov 2012	1a. Adopt the Positive Care and Control of Children for Foster Carers Policy developed by tri.x. 1b. Ensure training programme includes training for foster carers on positive care and control of children and de-escalation techniques.	April 2013 June 2013	Service Manager Permanency Placements and LAC SM Permanency Placements and LAC	1. Policy in place by new financial year 2. Recording and reporting allegations, LADO process, monitoring of allegations and numbers of resolutions 1. Attendance to training programme 2. Reduction in number of allegations	G G
2	Ensure that support and training is made available to foster carers, including hard-to-reach carers, to assist them in meeting the specific needs of the children they are caring for or are expected to care for. This is in relation to refresher training courses and when concerns are raised with regards to standards of care (NMS20.8)	Fostering inspection Areas for Improvement Nov 2012	2a. Identify carers who have not engaged in training programme. 2b. Identify reasons why carers are not accessing training. 2c. Develop and deliver appropriate training programmes and monitor progress (including Online options) 2d. Ensure carers who have had an allegation or 'standards of care' have specific training provided.	April 2013 April 2013 April 2013 April 2013 Ongoing	SM Permanency Placements and LAC SM Permanency Placements and LAC Fostering Team Manager Fostering Team Manager	1. Tailored and personalised training and development plans to be agreed at annual review. 2. Records kept of 'recommended training' to evaluate engagement 1. Training Plan in Place. 2. Foster carer Annual Reviews. 3. Progression through Fostering	G G G G
Safeguarding children and young people: Judged to be GOOD as at November 2012							
3	Ensure that a record is kept of the recruitment and suitability checks which have been carried out for foster carers and those working (including as volunteers), for the fostering service. This relates specifically to the recruitment of panel members (NMS 19.3)	Fostering inspection Areas for Improvement Nov 2012	3a. Ensure that there are up to date recruitment and suitability checks on all foster carers. 3b. Ensure that there are up to date recruitment and suitability checks on all panel members. 3c. Ensure that there are up to date recruitment and suitability checks on all staff and volunteers.	April 2013 Ongoing	Fostering Team Manager / QA Manager / Operations Manager in ART	1. 6 monthly agency report circulated to DMT. 2. Audit of all panel members' files as part of PA Framework	G
Leadership and management: Judged to be ADEQUATE as at November 2012							
4	Ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Ensure that immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring, this is in relation to case files (NMS 25.2)	Fostering inspection Areas for Improvement Nov 2012	Develop rolling programme of reading records prior to supervision so that all foster carers files are reviewed on a three monthly basis.	April 2013 Ongoing	Fostering Team Manager	1. Peer audit of 1 case per month as per QA Framework. 2. Qualitative analysis within quarterly fostering report. 3. Six monthly Panel Chair's Report	G

5	Ensure that the management committee members (DMT) receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the fostering service every 3 months; a) monitor the management and outcomes of the services in order to satisfy themselves that the service is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children;(b) satisfy themselves that the provider is complying with the conditions of registration. (NMS 25.7).	Fostering inspection Areas for Improvement Nov 2012	1. Monthly financial reporting and three monthly presentation by ART to DMT already in place. 2. Ensure monthly monitoring of compliance with the conditions of registration (NMS 25.7) by Agency Decision Maker.	April 2013 Ongoing	Fostering Team Manager/SM Permanency Placements and LAC/SM ART	As per National Minimum Standards, six monthly reports on fostering agency by registered manager and six monthly reports on fostering panel by panel chair.	G
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