

Committee: Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Date: 17 September 2013

Agenda item: 7

Wards: All

Subject: Adoption Service Update report

Lead officer: Paul Angeli, Head of Social Care and Youth Inclusion

Lead member: Councillor Maxi Martin

Forward Plan reference number:

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Recommendations:

- A. That CYP Panel consider and comment on the data and action in Merton's Adoption Service and through their scrutiny role support CSF departments continuous improvement plans.
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1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1. To provide the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel with a report on the regulated service area of adoption. To set out the activity in the year 2012-13 and to share details of the action plan in place to respond to areas for further development.
- 1.2. To receive feedback from members on progress and action to assist with CSF's commitment to continuous improvement and for the Panel to execute their scrutiny function.

2 DETAILS

2.1. Remit of the Adoption and Permanence Team

The role and functions of Merton's adoption agency are set out in statutory regulations. In summary the main purpose and functions of the Adoption and Permanence Team are:

- To family find for 'looked after' children for whom the Permanence Plan is long term fostering;
- To work with the children's social work teams to match looked after children with suitable permanent families and develop appropriate support plans;
- To recruit, assess, prepare and support domestic adopters who will match the needs of the children awaiting adoption;
- To provide assessments of inter-country adopters living in Merton (Merton have a service level agreement with the Inter Country Adoption Centre);

- To provide court reports in adoption proceedings, both for non-agency proceedings (e.g. step-parent) and for children 'looked after' by the Local Authority;
 - To provide advice on adoption and permanence issues to other professionals;
 - To provide a post adoption support service;
 - To provide a support and counselling service for birth parents including parents relinquishing children for adoption;
 - To complete viability assessments of permanent carers and special guardianship agreements in court proceedings, and the associated support plans.
- 2.2 The inspection framework ensures that the agency is complying with the regulatory framework.
- 2.3 The service sits in our Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion division alongside our services to support and improve outcomes for looked after children including finding permanent stable homes.
- 2.4 The performance of the service is reviewed monthly at CSF DMT and in depth reports on the specific regulatory requirements go to DMT on a quarterly basis. The services performance indicators are also reviewed by the Merton Safeguarding Children's Board and our Corporate Parenting Advisory Group in line with Ofsted's governance requirements on the service.
- 2.5 The next sections of the report detail progress on some of our key areas of work over the last year and also priorities looking forward.

3 Progress Update

3.1 Adopter Recruitment

The recruitment strategy for the year has been a combination of general advertising for adopters and permanent carers as well as specific advertising for Looked After Children needing placements. General advertising has focussed on dispelling myths in adoption relating to who can adopt in order to encourage a more diverse range of applicants. The challenge is for Merton to have Merton adopters available who can be matched with Merton children at the time that their plans are such that they can be matched with an adoptive placement.

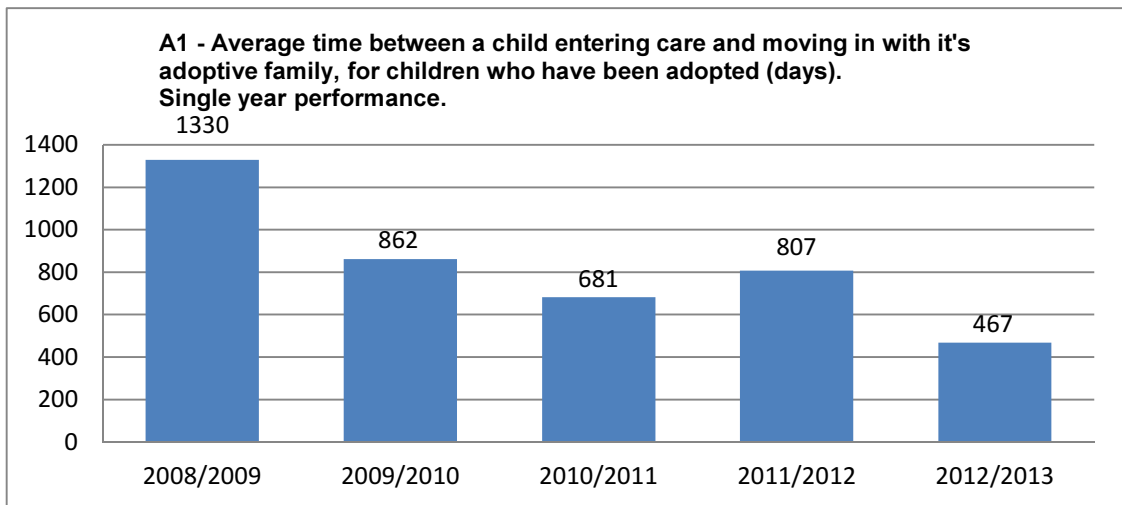
3.2 Achieving Permanence for Children

The Government will continue to monitor timeliness through review of annual returns and the adoption scorecard process. The adoption scorecard initial focus is on local authorities and the adoption process for children (this will develop to include data on timeliness for prospective adopters from 2014). The scorecard currently reviews 3 measures: All three indicators are published as a three year rolling average performance. The application of rolling averages has a significant impact on the current statistics as historical practice continues to impact on "current" score and likely future scores whilst previous years remain in the average.

1. A1 - The average time it takes for a child who goes on to be adopted from entering care to moving in with his or her adoptive family.
2. A2 - The proportion of children who wait longer for adoption than they should (includes those currently 'waiting to be adopted').
3. A3 -The average time it takes for a local authority to match a child to an adoptive family once the court has formally decided that adoption is the best option.

3.3 A1 - The average time it takes for a child who goes on to be adopted from entering care to moving in with his or her adoptive family.

3.4 Year on year we are able to demonstrate a trend of improvement in the A1 indicator, save for 2011/12 during which period a greater number of children were adopted.



3.5 Numbers of adoptions made

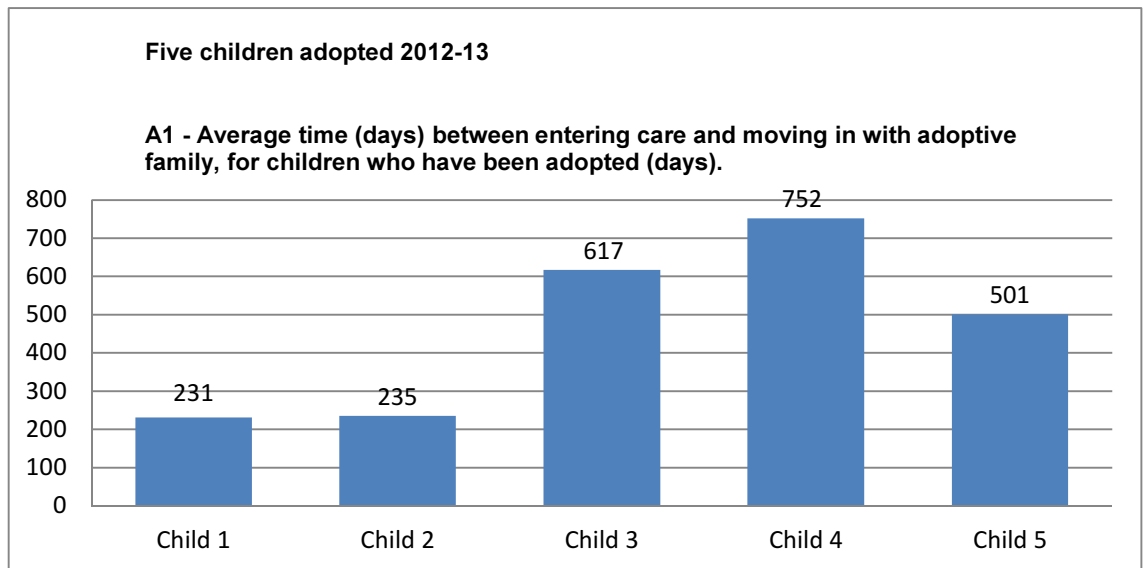
| Year | Number of CYP adopted |
|-----------|-----------------------|
| 2008/2009 | 5 |
| 2009/10 | 2 |
| 2010/11 | 5 |
| 2011/12 | 9 |
| 2012/13 | 5 |

3.6 The London Borough of Merton is committed to considering adoption for children requiring a permanent placement outside of their own family and this includes those with the most complex needs.

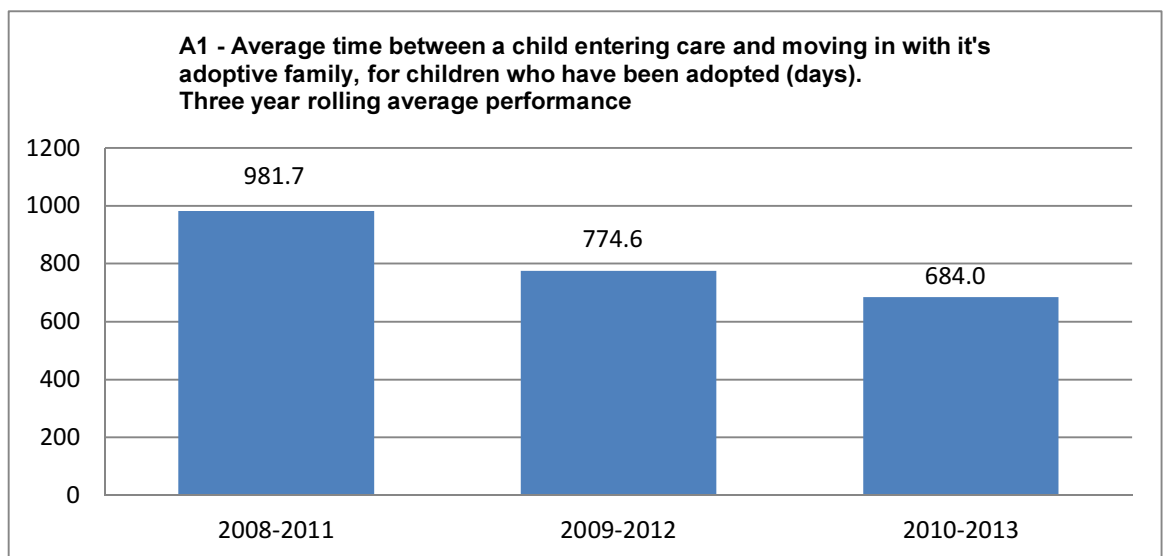
3.7 In 2012/13 the London Borough Merton had 5 children who had adoption orders made. Of these 5 children 2 took longer than the average time to be matched for adoption once the court had formally decided that adoption was the best option. Whilst 2 children did fall outside of the target timescale they were not significantly delayed (one took an additional 56 days, and the other an additional 32 days) despite both children having additional needs which

needed to be catered for in any match. Factors which are likely to cause delay include:

- Birth parent appeal at key stages in the process
- Complexity of the child's needs (eg disability)
- Sibling groups)



3.8 Despite the challenges of small cohorts and complex cases our three year rolling average 'A1' indicator shows improvement. For 2010-2013 Merton's A1 performance was 684 days, the national average for 2009-2012 was 636 days.

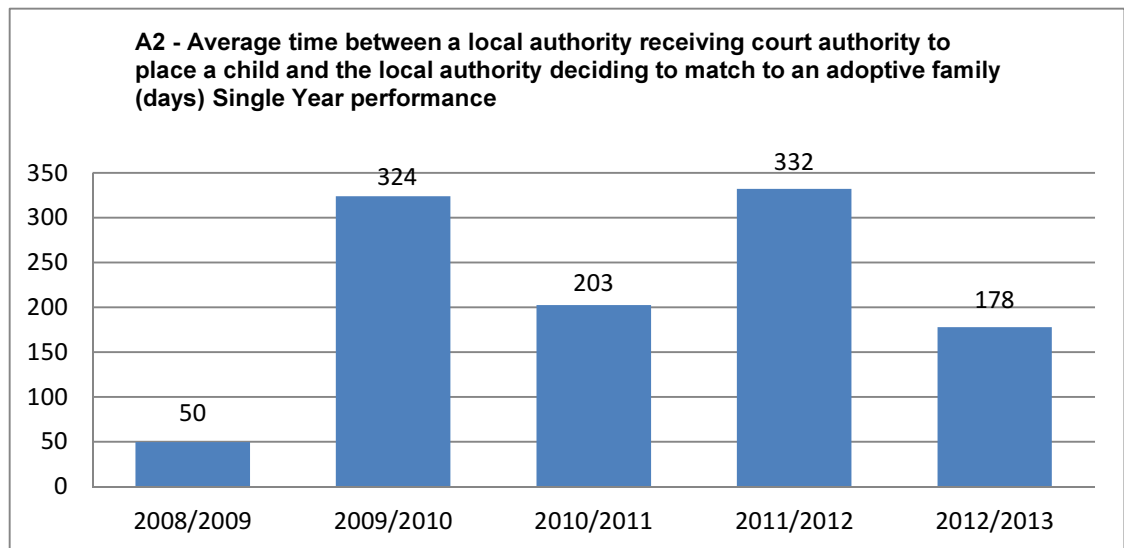


3.9 **A2 - The proportion of children who wait longer for adoption than they should.**

3.10 The matching process for those children with additional/complex needs can be a lengthy one, and as a result London Borough Merton has seen some individual cases impact significantly on the A2 indicator. Additionally it is of

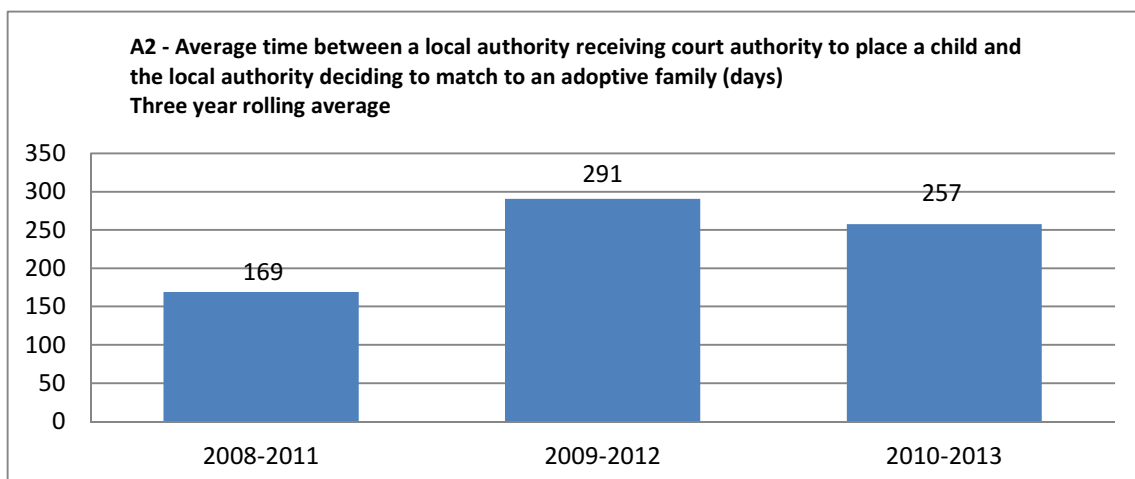
note that Merton is working with a small cohort in terms of adoption and therefore since the A2 indicator measures the average time for the process a small number of children experiencing delay will distort the reported figure.

3.11 Year on year however we continue to demonstrate and improvement save 2011/12.



3.12 In the year 2012/13 London Borough Merton had 5 children who had adoption orders made. Of these 5 children 2 took longer than the average time to be matched for adoption once the court had formally decided that adoption was the best option. Whilst 2 children did fall outside of the target timescale they were not significantly delayed (one took an additional 56 days, and the other an additional 32 days) despite both children having additional needs in respect of developmental uncertainty. 3 of the 5 children in this cohort were placed within A2 timescales (78 days, 91 days and 206 days respectively), with an average of 125 days from adoption plan to decision to match.

3.13 The application of rolling averages has a significant impact on the current statistics as historical practice is impacting on current statistics. It is positive to reflect that in the last 18 months since the increased focus on delay the average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding to match to an adoptive family is 170 days. Regardless of historical complexities our three year average for A2 is also showing improvement.



3.14 **A3 -The average time it takes for a local authority to match a child to an adoptive family once the court has formally decided that adoption is the best option.**

| Year | A3 Children who wait less than 21 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family (number and percentage). |
|---------|--|
| 2010/11 | 2/5 = 40% |
| 2011/12 | 3/9 = 33% |
| 2012/13 | 11/15 = 73% |

3.5 It is obviously important that children have stable placements pending the court process and in a number of cases this will be with their adoptive family. In the year 2012-13 there were a total of 14 children who had adoption as their plan, 8 of whom had been placed in their proposed adoptive placement. In the year 2012-13 there were 13 approved adoptive families, 9 of whom had children placed with them. There are currently 5 children with placement orders for whom the plan is adoption and all 5 are matched and are placed with their prospective adopters.

4. **Inspection**

4.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Panel will be aware that the agency's adoption service was inspected in January 2013. Ofsted found that overall the adoption agency provides an effective service to all affected by adoption and the overall outcome was Good. The report highlighted many areas of good practice; *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 of characteristics*.

4.2 The report clearly identifies that the adoption scorecard published last year highlighted the historical poor timescale issues the service had delivered. It does however identify that yet to be published performance shows substantial improvements across all areas.

4.3 The inspection team made five recommendations for areas for improvement which are detailed within the appended action plan (Appendix A). The inspection improvement plan was signed off by the Improvement Board in June 2013.

5. **The next 12 months**

5.1 The Government has been clear in its drive to improve services and outcomes for looked after children in all types of permanence care, with revised statutory guidance that clearly sets out the need to address the problem of delays within the adoption system. Merton shares this ambition and commitment which was endorsed in a motion to full Council.

5.2 It is apparent for all working within children's services that the current court processes are contributing to the delays encountered by children and as a result the Family Justice Review has reviewed the Public Law Outline with a programme that aims to dramatically speed up care proceedings, including a time limit of 26 weeks within which all but exceptional cases must be completed.

5.3 Local authorities need to start permanence planning for children at the earliest opportunity. In Merton the process from the day that they enter the care of the local authority is now tracked by senior managers on a monthly basis to ensure that practice processes are followed in line with expected timescales and delays for individual children are minimised.

5.4 We also believe that wherever we have decided that adoption is the plan for a child, we should aim to place the child as early as possible with the carers who are likely to become their adoptive parents. Options open to local authorities are concurrency placements (ideally for use with infants) and fostering to adopt. Merton currently has 1 child placed in a fostering to adopt placement. We use concurrent placements whenever appropriate.

5.5 In order to ensure that adopters are progressed through the assessment process in a timely manner changes have been made to the structure of the assessment. The assessment will now be in 2 stages and will be completed in 6 months. There will be a fast track process for those who have adopted before, or who are already approved foster-carers who wish to adopt a child in their care. In Merton the Service Manager LAC, Permanence and Placements is tracking the progress of all adopter assessments to ensure that timescales are met.

5.6 Improvements in adoption support will be secured through an 'Adoption Passport', a guarantee of the minimum support that adoptive families will receive.

6. **South West London Adoption Consortium**

6.1 Service Managers from Merton, Sutton, Kingston and Richmond have been working together to agree a plan to maximise the use of the consortium. The main focus for the first 6 months 2013-14 has been to strengthen the consortium's identity by developing a joint logo and advertising materials together with a joint recruitment initiative for potential adopters. The focus of the next 6 months will be to develop a consortium website, and to establish a virtual team to undertake the assessment work for the consortium.

7. Key Challenges

- 7.1 Although the Ofsted Inspection identified significant improvements in the service from its previous inspection it is important to note that there have been some highly complex cases managed by the adoption team in the past 24 months (both in terms of the children's needs and the court process). Due to complexity of these cases the timescales for these children have been outside of the adoption scorecard measures, and therefore there will be further impact on the scorecard performance. Ofsted were however of the view that Merton was successfully adopting more complex children and that this was a strength. The focus for the next 12 months will be to progress as many of the longer standing cases through to adoption orders.
- 7.2 Children's services have encountered difficulty in the recruitment of experienced workers and team manager for the adoption team. In June 2013 2 successful appointments were made to vacant social work posts and these experienced practitioners will start with the team in October. Unfortunately the recruitment of a team manager has not been successful, despite national advertising and a locum manager is currently in post (we will seek to re-advertise this post in September 2013).
- 7.3 To ensure that the improvement journey is a continuous one the Adoption Action Plan has been reviewed and updated to reflect the increased need for scrutiny and management oversight to secure timely outcomes for children who have a plan for permanence. The plan is attached as Appendix A.

8. Conclusions

The report sets out the progress and challenges for adoption in Merton and through exercising the scrutiny function, members will shape our future action plans to support our continuous improvement.

9. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 9.1 Elected members are required by statutory guidance to be informed of the functioning of this regulated service.

10 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

- 10.1 N/A

11 TIMETABLE

- 11.1 N/A

12 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1 The costs of the service and service improvement are contained within CSF budgets.

13 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

- 13.1 Covered in the main body of the report.

14 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

- 14.1 Sound and effective CSC and wider children's services are essential in delivering children's rights under the UN convention and our work strongly contributes to improving equality and promoting community cohesion.

- 15** **CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS**
- 15.1 None
- 16** **RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS**
- 16.1 None
- 17** **APPENDICES – THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS ARE TO BE
PUBLISHED WITH THIS REPORT AND FORM PART OF THE REPORT**
- 17.1 Appendix A: Ofsted Adoption Inspection Action Plan
- 18** **BACKGROUND PAPERS**
- 18.1 None

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