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**Merton Adoption Agency**

**Statement of Purpose**

**November 2021**

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| Issue Date  | Author | Date Of the Next Review  | Lead officer  |
| October 2021 | David Michael, Head of Corporate Parenting | November 2022 | Dheeraj Chibber Assistant Director, Children’s Social Care & Youth Inclusion |

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**1. Introduction**

The National Minimum Standards for Adoption require Adoption Agencies to compile a statement detailing what services are provided, the governing principles and who manages and provides the services.

The requirements of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and the Children and Families Act 2014 underpin the principles and values of our service.

London Borough of Merton Children’s Social Care & Youth Inclusion Division acts as an Adoption Agency. We update our Statement of Purpose on an annual basis to capture changes in the Adoption Agency.

This Statement of Purpose is for:

* Children and young people
* Birth relatives and legal guardians
* Prospective and approved adoptive families
* Adopted persons and their families
* Social workers working within Merton and in other authorities
* Elected Members
* Adoption and Permanence Panel members
* Ofsted
* Members of the public

In June 2015 the government announced its’ intention that local authorities should deliver their adoption services on a regional basis by 2020. Pan-London and regional collaboration resulted in nine South London local authorities coming together into a single Regional Adoption Agency, Adopt London South. The eight other south London Boroughs are:

* Wandsworth
* Sutton
* Croydon
* Lambeth
* Southwark
* Lewisham
* Kingston
* Richmond

Adopt London South, was launched in July 2019 and Merton’s adoption functions relating to recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters, family finding and post adoption support were gradually transferred to Adopt London South. Adopt London South has held operational responsibility for those transferred functions since September 2019.

Adopt London South is operated under the terms of a Partnership Agreement, which confirms the legal and governance arrangements; the budget; staffing and funding contributions for the 9 local authorities. The Head of Service reports to the Adopt London South Management Board. The Board is chaired by the Southwark Director of children’s services and comprised of Directors from each Local Authority with the Assistant Director Children’s Social Care & Youth Inclusion attending on Merton’s behalf.

The Adopt London Regional Executive Board oversees effective collaboration across the 4 Adopt London Regions, Adopt London North, South, East and West to promote consistency of practice and quality of service across the 23 London boroughs which are part of Adopt London. A shared Adopt London website provides advice, guidance and information to anyone who is interested in adoption.

This Statement of Purpose sets out the adoption functions retained by Merton Adoption Agency, the functions held by Adopt London South and the way in which Merton and Adopt London South work together.

Adopt London South is hosted by Southwark Council**.** The adoption functions provided on behalf of Merton and the other south London boroughs are:

* The recruitment of persons as prospective adopters;
* The assessment of prospective adopter’s suitability to adopt a child;
* The approval of prospective adopters as suitable to adopt a child;
* Identifying a particular approved prospective adopter with whom it proposed a child be placed, as soon as reasonably practicable
* Managing the process by which recommendations in individual cases are formally submitted to Adoption Panels and to facilitate consideration by the relevant local authority decision maker; and
* The provision of adoption support services.
* To identify suitable adopters for particular children, for whom a local authority is the “corporate parent” or where consent to adoption is given by the birth parent,

The aim of bringing these local authority adoption services into a single Regional Adoption Agency is to:

* Increase the number of prospective adopters recruited and assessed as suitable to adopt a child
* Increase the number of children with adoption plans who are adopted;
* Reduce the length of time children with adoption plans wait to be adopted;
* Improve post adoption support services to families who have adopted;
* Reduce the number of individul adoption agencies in the south London region to improve efficiency and effectiveness of adoption functions

**2. Values and Principles**

London Borough of Merton believes that it is best for children to be supported to grow up with their parents or within their wider family network. Where children cannot be safely cared for by their family and adoption is assessed as in their best interests, Merton seeks to secure timely emotional and legal permanency through adoption. Merton’s Adoption Agency shares the values and principles that underpin the National Minimum Standards for Adoption:

* The child is the focus of the service and the child’s welfare, safety and needs are at the centre of the adoption process.
* Children are entitled to grow up as part of a loving family that can meet their developmental needs during childhood and beyond.
* Adopted children should have an enjoyable childhood, and benefit from excellent parenting and education, enjoying a wide range of opportunities to develop their talents and skills leading to a successful adult life.
* Children’s wishes and feelings are important and will be actively sought and fully taken into account at all stages of the adoption process. No child should be considered too young to express their feelings, verbally or non-verbally, and age appropriate methods of communication should be used.
* Delays should be avoided as they can have a severe impact on the health and development of the children waiting to be adopted.
* To ensure that all decisions are fair and transparent.
* A sense of identity is important to a child’s well-being. To help children develop this, their ethnicity, cultural background, religion, language and sexuality need to be properly recognised and positively valued and promoted.
* The particular needs of disabled children and complex needs will be fully recognised and taken into account.
* Children, birth parents/guardians and families and adoptive parents and families will be valued and respected.
* Positive significant relationships in a child’s life are acknowledged and are preserved through appropriate arrangements for the child to keep in touch and maintain a connection.
* A positive partnership between all those involved in adoption is essential to deliver best outcomes for children.
* Adoption is a life-long commitment with far-reaching consequences for those who are affected. This is recognised by all involved in delivering adoption services.
* Adoption services are delivered in a sensitive way and confidentiality is respected.

Similarly, Adopt London South delivers their adoption functions in line with their values and principles:

* All adoptive children are found permanent loving families as quickly as possible where they will be safe and secure.
* Adopters are recruited directly from South London communities so that we have a range of adopters well prepared to meet the needs of children waiting.
* Prospective adopters are warmly welcomed and supported and are not deterred because of their ethnicity, sexuality, age of social background
* Children are supported to bond with their new family
* The child’s ethnic origin, cultural background, religion, language and sexuality will be valued and promoted when decisions are made
* Professionals understand the profound impact of care and adoption on children’s wellbeing
* Children and families get the support they need when they need it
* The particular needs of disabled children will be fully recognised and taken into account when decisions are made
* Adoption has lifelong implications for all involved and requires lifelong commitment from many organisations, professionals and individuals working well together.
* Birth parents and families will be treated fairly, openly and offered a support service that recognises the lifelong implications of adoption.
* Adopted adults will receive advice, guidance and information from their adoption file.

**Equal Opportunities**

Merton Children’s Social Care and Merton’s Adoption Agency works positively and respectfully with all service users and partner agencies. Needs arising from diversity are considered and we do not discriminate on the basis of race, colour, religion, language, culture, disability, gender, sexual orientation or age.

The Service works within Equal Opportunities legislation and supports anti-discriminatory social work practice. We will work to secure an adoptive family which meets a child’s emotional and developmental needs taking into account their ethnicity, religion, language, culture, gender and disability whilst balancing the child’s right to permanency and reducing delay in achieving this for them.

**3. The Organisational Structure of the Adoption Agency:**

Since the launch of Adopt London South, Merton Adoption Agency has retained responsibility for the following adoption functions:

* The identification of children who may need a plan or parallel plan for adoption.
* Notification to and information sharing with Adopt London South of children who may need an adoption plan.
* Identification and notification to Adopt London South of children who may be suitable for an early permanence placement.
* The assessment of children who may need or who have a plan for adoption to ensure their current and likely future needs are identified.
* The instigation of care proceedings to safeguard children and applications for Placement Orders to allow children to be placed for adoption.
* Arranging and providing the required information for the Agency Decision Maker to determine if a child should be placed for adoption.
* Planning for children who have a care plan or a parallel plan for adoption.
* Liaising with and updating the Adopt London South family finding social worker.
* Providing Agency Decision Maker approval to the matches of children with prospective adopters.
* Tracking the progress and timeliness of plans to achieve adoption for children.
* Planning and supporting children to transfer their care to their prospective adoptive family.

In Merton, those adoption functions are located within the children’s social care teams. The children’s social care teams are part of the Children’s Social Care and Youth Inclusion Division of the Children’s, Schools and Families Directorate. The Assistant Director, Children’s Social Care & Youth Inclusion is the Registered Adoption Manager. The Assistant Director and designated Heads of Service are the Agency Decision Maker (ADM).

All of the Team Managers and Social Workers in the children’s social work teams are qualified and registered with Social Work England. Some Social Workers and Team Managers meet the requirements under the Restriction on the Preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations 2005 and Section 56 of the Care Standards Act 2000. Where Social Workers or Managers do not meet these requirements their work is supervised and reviewed by Managers experienced in adoption who fulfil the necessary requirements to undertake adoption work.

In line with Merton’s policy all social workers and managers receive regular supervision. Managers and Heads of Service are available for consultation and advice in between planned supervision sessions. Social workers and managers have annual appraisals and their training needs are regularly reviewed. The workforce are actively encouraged to seek further training both internally and externally.

Merton Adoption Agency has developed a designated Permanency Lead function to oversee adoption and permanency practice and interface with Adopt London South.

**Table 1: Merton Adoption Agency Management Structure October 2021**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Name | Designation |
| Jane McSherry  | Director of Children’s Services |
| Dheeraj Chibber  | Assistant Director CSC & YI(ADM for Merton) |
| David Michael  | Head of Service – Corporate Parenting(ADM for Merton) |
| Claire Sowerby  | Interim Head of Service – Family Support & Safeguarding (ADM for Merton) |
| John Walsh | Head of Service – Adolescent Support Safeguarding and Care Planning Service(ADM for Merton) |
| Ana Dias | Permanency Lead and Fostering Panel Advisor |

Merton Adoption Agency is based at:

Merton Civic Centre,

London Road,

Morden,

Surrey,

SM4 5DX

**Table 2: Adopt London South Management Structure January 2021**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Name | Designation |
| Susanna Daus | Head of Service  |
| Pam Walton  | Service Manager  |
| Nicola Sadler (SW) and Lucy Macharia (SE) | Adopter Assessment |
|  Kirsteen Lowrie | Family Finding  |
| Audrey Bouazizi | Adoption Support and (ASSA) |
| Candice Siddle | Adoption Recruitment |
| Florence Mo and Laurice Harris  | Adoption and Permanence Panel  |
| Lorraine Miller | Business and Performance Manager  |

Adopt London South is based at:

London Borough of Southwark Council

160 Tooley Street

London

SE1 2QH

Adopt London South Social Workers and managers work closely with all 9 partner Councils and have access to all partner Council’s offices. The agency employs approx. 51 staff. All adoption social workers are experienced and are registered with Social Work England.

The Head of Service acts as the Agency Decision Maker .

**4. Multiagency Working**

The children’s social work teams in Merton are committed to keeping the child at the centre of our work. There are positive working relationships across Help & Family Assessment, Family Support & Safeguarding, Corporate Parenting, Merton’s Fostering Service and Adopt London South.

Permanence and Care Planning Meeting (PCPMs) are used to involve all the relevant parties in permanence planning for children. These are held at an early stage and then on a regular basis to ensure that permanence is achieved in a timely way. Early notifications are made to Adopt London South to enable the Family Finding Team to start their involvement and searching for every child where adoption may be the plan.

Merton’s Permanency Lead and children’s social work team are developing new ways of working together to improve practice and speed up the process of children moving in with their prospective adopters where adoption is their plan.

**5. Adoption Agency Users**

In partnership with Adopt London South, adoption services are provided for children and adults in the following ways:

By Merton Adoption Agency:

* Children whose care plans are adoption or are likely to become adoption.
* Birth relatives of children whose care plan is adoption.
* Birth parents who are considering relinquishing their baby/child.
* Adopted adults and members of their birth families.

Jointly by Merton Adoption Agency and Adopt London South:

* Support for Early Permanence placement throughout the care proceedings and the adoption process.
* Children’s social workers and adoption social workers jointly undertake the task of planning for permanence and preparing children for adoption.
* The responsibility for matching and supporting adoptive families is a shared task until the adoption order.
* Support and signposting to counselling services for adopted adults wishing to find out about their birth families.

By Adopt London South:

* Children and adoptive parents who require adoption support services.
* Recruitment of prospective adoptive families and Early Permanence carers.
* Assessment and preparation of adoptive families, including visits to the home, a home study, taking up references and statutory checks and running preparation training
* Family finding for children who need a permanent home through adoption.
* Support for families waiting for a child to be placed with them.
* Advice, guidance and support to adoptive families during the matching process and after placement.
* A range of Adoption support services for children and families affected by adoption including assessments for therapeutic help through the Adoption Support fund.
* The Family Finding Team become involved with every child where adoption may be the plan during the decision making process and takes the lead in family finding at the earliest point possible
* Adoption letterbox service, direct contact support service and access to adoption archives. This enables adopted children to maintain contact with their birth families.
* Assessment of families adopting a child known to them.
* Those wishing to adopt from abroad are referred to the Intercountry Adoption Centre who offer specialist advice and support

**6. Adoption Services Provided**

**Children Needing Adoptive Placements**

Merton Children’s Social Care and Adoption Agency are committed to providing the best possible outcomes for the children in our care and for those children who cannot safely live with their birth families. Our aim is to secure safe, secure, loving and permanent forever families. We thoroughly explore close and extended family members and friends in the child and parents’ network before a decision that adoption is in their child’s best interests is made.

Comprehensive assessments, Child Permanence Reports, are completed for all children requiring permanence outside of their family network. These identify children’s current and future needs to inform family finding and decision making regarding the suitability of a prospective adopter to be able to meet their needs.

For those children who have or are likely to have an ‘adoption plan’, Adopt London South recruits and assesses prospective adopters who can meet the needs of those children.

Adoption London South is committed to fulfilling the requirements of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and the Children and Families Act 2014 by:

* ensuring the provision of a high quality adoption service which guarantees the best possible standards of care, safety and protection for children or young people who are looked after and who need adoptive placements.
* ensuring that all those whose lives have been affected by adoption are helped to identify and receive appropriate services.
* working in partnership with adoptive families & other agencies ensuring the service is based on statutory requirements & good practice within the principles of value for money for the agency.

Comparatively, London Borough of Merton have a low rate of children looked after. The average ranging from approximately 135 to 165 children looked after at any one time. About 6% of all our children in care are placed for adoption each year.

The profile of children needing adoption placements continues to be diverse and as a result Adopt London South need to recruit a wide range of prospective adopters to meet the differing needs of our children. Whilst there is an ongoing need to identify adoptive placements for babies Adopt London South also need to recruit adopters who will consider older children, brother and sisters of different ages, children whose future development is uncertain and those from black and minority ethnic groups. Many children who are placed for adoption have experienced neglect and/or abuse and some will be affected by future developmental delay and trauma.

**7. Quality Assurance and Monitoring**

For children, statutory Looked After Reviews are chaired by Merton Children’s Social Care’s Independent Reviewing Officers who track the progress of children’s plans, identify new actions and escalate concerns regarding drift in securing permanence. Regular Permanence and Care Planning Meetings are chaired by Team Managers to ensure actions to achieve permanence are completed and progress is being made in a timely way for the child.

The Permanency Lead oversees the progress of all permanency plans across Merton Children’s Social Care providing bi-annual reports to the Assistant Director, Children’s Social Care and Youth Inclusion and the Corporate Parenting Board. The Permanency Lead meets with the link Family Finder from Adopt London South on a monthly basis to review the progress of family finding activity for children with an adoption plan.

Progress of children in pre-proceedings, proceedings and with a Placement Order is tracked on a monthly basis by the Head of Family Support & Safeguarding.

The services provided by Adoption London South for adults and children, prospective adopters, adopters seeking support, birth families, adopted children and adults are all monitored by managers and the Head of Service. The quality and timeliness of prospective adopter assessments and matches are scrutinised by the Adoption Panel and feedback provided to Adopt London South.

Adopt London South performance and information about children and prospective adopters waiting is reported to the Adopt London South Board by the Head of Service on a monthly basis. This Board is attended by the Assistant Director, Children’s Social Care and Youth Inclusion. The Head of corporate Parenting attends Adopt London South’s monthly operational meeting to participate in the co-production and development of good practice and joint working approaches.

**8. Complaints and Feedback**

Wherever possible complaints are dealt with informally. In the first instance, any complaint received is dealt with in this way and efforts will be made to resolve the issue to everyone’s satisfaction. The Council has a corporate complaints procedure that operates if no resolution is achieved at this stage.

Where a complaint against a prospective adoptive or adoptive parent constitutes a child protection allegation this is dealt with as a child protection enquiry and is investigated under the London Safeguarding Children Procedures.

There is a guide for service users who wish to comment on any of our services. This leaflet includes details of how to complain. It is included in all adoption information packs and on our website. There is information in the Children’s Guide to Adoption advising children how to contact the complaints team.

The Complaints Team,

Civic Centre,

London Road

Morden.

Surrey

SM4 5QZ

Telephone: 020 8545 3086

Or you can make your complaint by email using the email address below: childrensservicescomplaints@merton.gov.uk

**Other Contacts**

Ofsted

Merton Adoption Agency is subject to Inspection by Ofsted and they can be contacted if you are worried about the service provision. Ofsted’s responsibility is to ensure Merton Adoption Agency uses the required standards and good practice guidance. It can also investigate matters referred to it.

Ofsted National Business Unit

Piccadilly Gate,

Store Street

Manchester

M1 2WD

Email: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk

General Helpline 0300 123 1231

Children’s Commissioner for England

The Children’s Commissioner for England promotes and protects children’s rights in England. She does this by listening to what children and young people say about what matters to them and making sure adults in charge take their views and interests into account. The law says that, in her work, the Children’s Commissioner should have particular regard to children living away from home or receiving social care.

If you are a child or young person who lives away from home or who receives social care and who needs advice or assistance, you can find out how The Children’s Commissioner can help and get in touch with her by calling free phone 0800 528 0731.

Or by email to: info.request@childrenscommissioner.gsi.gov.uk

Independent Review Mechanism

Adoptive applicants who are turned down for approval or matching decisions either by a recommendation by the Adoption Panel or by a decision by the Agency Decision Maker are able to ask for their case to be reviewed by the Independent Review Mechanism.

Independent Review Mechanism

Contract Manager

Unit 4

Pavilion Business Park

Royds Hall Road

Wortley

Leeds

LS126AJ

Telephone: 0845 450 3956

Website: [www.independentreviewmehanism.org.uk/adoption](http://www.independentreviewmehanism.org.uk/adoption)

Email: irm@baaf.org.uk

Concerns/Complaints about Adoption South London

Adopters who wish to complain about their own adoption journey can complain under the Southwark Corporate complaints procedure.https://www.southwark.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/complaints-comments-and-compliments.

If the complaint is more specifically about the child’s social work service from Merton before the child was adopted, this complaint may be addressed to Merton’s Complaints Team.

All young people, for whom there is an adoption plan and who are of an appropriate age and understanding are entitled to make complaints. .All birth parents of children for whom the Adoption Agency is planning adoption are entitled to make Complaints either with London Borough of Merton or with Adopt London South.

https://www.southwark.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/complaints-comments-and-compliments

Any person who has concerns about either Merton Adoption Agency or Adopt London South may contact:

OFSTED

Piccadilly Gate Store Street

Manchester

M1 2WD

Telephone: 0300 123 1231

Email: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk

Web: www.ofsted.gov.uk