

Supporting and promoting the well being of children in need and their families in Merton



From Possibility...

BACKGROUND

The London Borough of Merton Council (Merton) is one of 26 four star councils in England and Wales. It has an annual budget in the region of £230 million and is the largest employer in Merton with a staff of over 5,000. Merton has a strongly improving direction of travel, strongly performing services and performing well in its use of resources.

Merton Council as a “floor” authority receives the lowest possible share of central government funding support. Every year, in order to maintain its financial position, the council has to close a gap between its resources (mainly council tax and central government funding) and its commitments. In the budget round for 2010/2011, the initial budget gap was over £14m.

Although, to date, Merton has been able to meet its 4% annual efficiency savings target, initially by obvious savings on a service by service basis, they now need to make a step change to the way they do business.

The council has embarked on a transformation programme in order to make the required reductions in spend while maintaining or improving the customer experience of services. This means taking a radical look at what the council will look like in the future in terms of cost base and staffing.

This means analysing processes to ensure money is only spent on things which directly add value to the customer using “Lean” thinking principles.

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OUR APPROACH



The programme of work we designed aims to support Merton becoming a truly Lean organisation (Lean is not just about process efficiency but also about creating a culture where all staff know what they are doing, why they are doing it and how well they are doing). When this awareness is prevalent, Lean uses the knowledge and capability of all staff to challenge what they do and develop more effective systems. When this is coupled with Lean Thinking, focusing on the real needs of the customer and identifying the real cost of a process to Merton and the customer from end to end, we can identify what real waste is and make major decisions to redesign processes.

When describing how to introduce a successful Lean programme we always emphasise the importance of having a mix of top-down systems improvement work balanced with the bottom-up Lean foundation activity. The latter develops the culture of continuous improvement enabling the major changes to succeed, sustain and continue to develop.

The top-down improvement work providing a “systematic review and redesign” methodology using a mix of Lean process improvement tools, and the development of Merton’s staff and managers’ Lean understanding and change management capability through training, coaching and mentoring.

To help clarify the main project themes and to begin to engage senior managers, a diagnostic was carried out based on existing data within the organisation, and ensuring that representative activities of the organisation were investigated in some depth.

This diagnostic was fed back to the senior management team and a number of potential areas for service reviews investigated. It was tempting to focus the service reviews on the areas of greatest financial benefit; however there is an additional imperative for the organisation to build its capability to undertake reviews going forward.

As a result reviews were selected across 4 of the 5 directorates within the council. The goals for the reviews also differed;

Transactional process where cost savings needed to be achieved whilst maintaining or improving service levels (Revenues and Benefits);

Social work environment where a new policy was being introduced (self directed support for Adult Social Care (ASC)) and significant reductions in staff via voluntary redundancy were happening. Improved customer service was also desirable;

Demonstrate Lean in a front-line service organisation where the workplace is very dispersed – Waste Operations;

‘Difficult’ service – demonstrate the applicability of Lean where the organisation has multiple interlocking functions (Children, Schools and Families (CSF)).

To Actuality...

This case study now focuses on the service review commissioned within Children's Schools and Families processes.

Merton's Children's Schools and Families (CSF), children's social care services arrange services to support and promote the well being of vulnerable children and their families. Where ever possible they aim to keep families together by providing practical and emotional support in the home. However, if it is in the interest of the child or young person to be looked after by the council away from their home, they arrange alternative care with a foster carer or if a permanent placement is required with an adoptive family. The Lean Review looked at some of the processes in place to provide this support and care to Merton children and their families.

The CSF children's social care service reviews are being implemented in phases across the wider CSC division, phase one of the CSF reviews included the Adoption and Permancy team and the Fostering team. The phase two service reviews included the Children in Need team.

Each service review starts by identifying key processes and defining who the process exists to serve (the customer) and what value is to them.

Who are the Customers for CSF?

- Children and young people
- Parents, Relatives, Adopting Parents, Fostering Families, Potential Foster Carers
- Recipients of post process services (e.g. birth families)

What is Value in the customer's eyes?

- Meets their needs (safety, emotional, culture, race)
- Timely service & support
- Timely and appropriate information/ advice
- Being matched / satisfactory outcome at panel / approved
- Being supported

The teams focused on high volume or poor performing processes where improvements would have the biggest impact. The Adoption and Permancy team chose to look at Domestic Adoptions and the family finding process. The Fostering team worked on the recruitment of foster carers' process.



Following the high level service review process (shown above) managers and staff used Lean tools such as value stream mapping (VSM), and day in the life of (DILO) analysis (Observations in the workplace) to identify activities not directly contributing to customer value (as defined by the teams). This analysis identified process wastes that could then be removed or reduced in the process re-design workshops using Lean tools and techniques.



Examples of some of the process waste found within CSF:



Rework	Reports rewritten due to failing the quality assurance checks Standards not clear for report writing
Overproduction	Inappropriate referrals
Over Processing	Management checks of decisions made Duplicate recording
Waiting	Scheduled allocation of work Handovers between admin workers and social workers
Inventory	Batching of systems recording of data Reports waiting to be checked and amended
Transportation	Sending copies of completed reports to panel members
Movement	Travelling to and from customer meetings and interviews

The newly mapped processes were transformed into implementation plans and rolled out with Lean foundation tools such as information centres, 5S (a workplace organisation tool) and standardisation to support and sustain change within the teams and their processes.

CHANGES & BENEFITS

Adoption & Permancy Team

A key issue that emerged was the inconsistency in the content of the Adopters Reports. This resulted in a series of management checks being added into the process, multiple management sign offs and modifications before the report could be submitted to the Adoption Panel for approval. Through monitoring 'right first time' and error rates these reports failed the quality assurance checks and needed modification before reaching the Adoption Panel. These checking, amending and sign-offs were adding more than eight weeks to the cycle time and wasting approximately 30 hours of Social Worker and Management time per cycle.

By agreeing a standardised format of the report with all relevant parties and replacing the checking stages with individual performance management, the team were able to:

- Increase the team capacity by 15%
- Reduce Placement Process end to end time by 8 weeks
- Improve the quality (and ensure the standard) of the Adoption Placement Reports

Fostering Team

The key process area that was addressed in the Fostering Service review was the recruitment of Foster Carers, an issue most local authorities have in common. Key issues identified by the team included;

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1. Not enough Foster Carers are recruited in a year
2. Excessive amount of time used assessing 'unsuitable' candidates (50% of potential foster carers were dropping out or being filtered out of the process 6 months after initial interest was expressed).

Through a process re-design incorporating more assessment of individuals and information for potential foster carers up front, the team was able to:

- Eliminate waiting times
- Reduce cycle time in the recruitment process by 20%
- Immediate 10% increase in team capacity

Children In Need Team

The Children in Need service review was on-going at the time of writing this case study, and the potential to increase the scope of the teams activities was being investigated. However initial investigations indicated that the team have complicated and detailed processes with corresponding high levels of process waste. The team deal with a number of third parties such as the police, hospital staff, family support workers and charitable organisations. In addition to reducing waste in the processes the team examined the relationships with their partner organisations to see where these interactions could be streamlined and duplicated activities removed.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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PHONE: +44 (0) 845 366 8528 EMAIL: seriousfun@ad-esse.com WEBSITE: www.ad-esse.com