

London Borough of Harrow Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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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.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good: this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory: this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate: this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

The London Borough of Harrow has a unique arrangement in place for discharging its responsibilities in relation to its adoption service. It has a partnership arrangement with Coram, a Voluntary Adoption Agency, which undertakes the preparation, assessment, approval and support of domestic adopters and family finds for children for whom adoption is the plan. Harrow retains its responsibilities for placing children, undertaking the assessments of those who wish to adopt from overseas and for non-agency adoptions. It is also responsible for providing post adoption support, birth records counselling and intermediary services, which are undertaken by the Adoption, Support and Kinship (ASK) team and via a service level agreement with a registered adoption support agency.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

The agency has been proactive in acting on the findings from the last inspection and as a result many aspects of the service provided for children and adopters have significantly improved.

The arrangements with Coram are fully embedded and the two agencies work collaboratively; this means that there have been excellent outcomes for children in terms of improved timescales and a good choice of placements.

There are sound matching processes that help to provide children with safe, stable and secure placements and ensure that their diverse needs can be met. There have been no disruptions since the last inspection and this is a good indicator that the matches made have been sound.

While the assessments for inter-country adopters, carried out by Harrow employed social workers, are of a reasonable quality references from employers are not always obtained. However, a range of other references from people who know the applicants well are obtained so the impact on children's safety or well-being can be considered as minimal.

There are robust approval and decision-making processes that ensure that: adoption is the correct plan for a child; adopters are suitable people to adopt; matches are appropriate and adoptive children are likely to be cared for well into adulthood and beyond.

While, in general, the recruitment practice for staff and panel members is robust there are some shortfalls in respect of the recruitment processes for sessional

workers. In addition recruitment files do not all contain the required information. This does not impact adversely on the safety of children as sessional workers do not work directly with children and the shortfalls in the files are administrative.

There are much improved support services for adoptive families, birth parents and adult adoptees. A more strategic approach is taken to the support services than at the time of the last inspection and the workers in the ASK team are now far more experienced and knowledgeable about people's needs relating to their adoptive status.

This is a well-managed agency, and the calibre of managers and staff is good. The partnership arrangements with Coram are working well, and the child is at the centre of all of the work carried out. There are robust arrangements for monitoring the services provided and good outcomes for children are achieved.

There are some minor shortfalls in the contents of the Statement of Purpose but these have no impact on the well-being or safety of children.

Improvements since the last inspection

Following the last inspection there were two requirements and 10 recommendations made. One of the requirements has been fully addressed and for one there have been some improvements made. Seven of the recommendations have been fully met and the remaining three need some more work.

The requirement that has been fully addressed relates to: ensuring that all staff who prepare reports on adopters or children meet the requirements of the regulations; this has now been addressed.

The recommendations made that have been fully addressed relate to: the development of the health and safety questionnaire, this has now been further developed and follows good practice; implementing a system for the renewal of Criminal Record Bureau checks, this has been implemented and ensures that all checks are up to date; implementing a strategic approach to adoption support, this has been addressed and ensures that all adoptive families in Harrow receive a prompt and effective post adoption support service; implementing a more effective service for birth parents, this has been achieved and now birth parents can access independent support at an early stage of the adoption plan; ensuring that all children placed for adoption have a high quality life story book, this has been implemented and ensures that children are provided with clear reasons for their adoption and information about their early life; implementing a more strategic approach to the support and services offered to birth relatives and adopted adults, this has now been achieved and ensures that services to adults are of a good quality, and ensuring the policies and procedures reflect the current arrangements for the adoption service; these have been updated and provide clear guidance to staff about the expectations placed on them.

The requirement where some improvements have been made relates to, ensuring

that sessional staff are subject to the same robust recruitment and selection procedures as permanent members of staff and a recommendation relating to this, ensuring that files on sessional staff contain all the required information. While some progress has been made as the files contain more information than they did at the last inspection, however, shortfalls in these areas remain.

The recommendations where some progress have been made relate to: ensuring that all assessments are of an acceptable standard, are rigorous and analytical, and include references from employers and second opinion visits where necessary, there have been some improvements in the quality of the assessments but employers references have not been obtained for all adopters. The agency was also asked to ensure the nominated manager has a suitable management qualification, while this has not yet been achieved the manager is completing a management qualification with an expected finish date of July 2011.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The London Borough of Harrow, hereafter referred to as Harrow, entered into a partnership arrangement with Coram, a Voluntary Adoption Agency, three and a half years ago. This arrangement means that Harrow delegate the responsibility for the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters to Coram, who are also responsible for family finding for Harrow children who have adoption as a plan. As Coram is also inspected by Ofsted, and has to comply with the same national minimum standards and legislation, their practice is subject to their own agency's inspection, last carried out in October 2008. The findings of this inspection are detailed in Coram's inspection report.

Children waiting for an adoptive placement benefit from the very effective systems to alert Coram of their situation. For example there are monthly permanency tracking meetings, chaired by the partnership manager. These act as an early alert to the Coram teams that the child may need an placement and this usefully feeds into the family finding and recruitment processes. There is robust monitoring, of each child's situation, by the monthly care proceedings and permanency tracking panel which ensures that drift for children is kept to a minimum. The partnership manager attends this meeting and provides written update reports about the children; this ensures that the panel is absolutely clear about each child's situation at any one time. These permanency planning arrangements have resulted in much improved timescales for children waiting for an adoptive placement and currently there are no Harrow children waiting for a placement; this is excellent practice.

The partnership arrangement with Coram provides children with an impressive pool of over 60 potential adopters at any one time. This means that a diverse range of needs can be met in a very short timescale. However, when there are no suitable prospective adopters in this pool, other agencies are approached to try and achieve a suitable match.

There are effective arrangements for matching children with those prospective adopters most likely to be able to meet their needs into adulthood and beyond. There are formal selection meetings held to consider the family which will be the best match. Careful thought is given to the child's cultural, religious and ethnicity needs and to the viability of placing siblings together or in separate placements. Wherever possible birth family members' views are sought and taken into account in the type of placement they would like for their child.

Some responses from domestic and inter-country adopters' surveys reported some delays at various stages of the process. For some they felt the delays had been caused by the agency. Currently there is not a waiting list for adopters so while delays are always frustrating for potential and actual applicants the current situation for them is positive. Other comments about delays relate to delays after approval when waiting for a child from overseas; this can be a long drawn out and frustrating process. However, the agency has no control over these issues and can only support potential adopters during the waiting period.

Adopters wishing to adopt a child from overseas are prepared by a registered adoption agency, the Inter-country Adoption Centre. This agency is subject to its own inspection and report, the last inspection was carried out in April 2010 and the findings are detailed in their inspection report. Following attendance at the preparation course Harrow social workers carry out the assessments of the inter-country applicants. The assessment reports are, overall, of a satisfactory quality and they are good enough to allow the adoption panel to make an informed decision about the applicants' suitability. However, employer references are not being obtained in every case. The health and safety checklist is comprehensive; it has been updated since the last inspection.

The work of Harrow's adoption panel, as it relates to this inspection, involves the approval of children for adoption, the approval of inter-country adopters and the match of a child with a suitable family. The Coram panel deals with the approval of domestic adopters.

The adoption panel provides robust scrutiny to the work put in front of it. It is governed by clear policies and procedures and convened regularly to ensure there is no delay for children. The panel is chaired effectively by an experienced and competent chair person and is properly constituted. Panel has a diverse membership of people who have a range of personal and professional experience of adoption and working with children. Adopters are welcomed to the panel at which their case is being held and one adopter commented that although panel was very daunting, 'our social worker was like an advocate, supporting us through all the panels.' Social workers confirmed that they feel that panel gives proper scrutiny to their work.

Panel members have been properly vetted to ensure they are suitable people to hear the cases heard on an adoption panel. Members have been through an induction process to ensure they understand their role as a panel member. They are also provided with ongoing training to ensure they have the knowledge and understanding they need to be effective in their role.

The panel administration is of a good quality. The papers are provided to members in advance so that they have time to consider the proposals. Clear minutes are made of each meeting and these fully reflect the panel members discussions, the recommendations made and the reasons for the recommendations. They also detail any advice given by panel

There is a robust decision-making process in place which ensures that the agency decision is made only after there has been full consideration of all of the factors in the case. All relevant people are informed about the decision in a timely way.

The recruitment processes for the employment of staff are overall satisfactory and improvements have been made since the last inspection. There is now an effective system for the renewal of Criminal Records Bureau checks which ensures all of these checks are up to date. However, the arrangements for recruitment of sessional workers are not so robust. Staff working for the purposes of the agency are suitably qualified and experienced in carrying out their respective roles.

The agency has satisfactory arrangements for safeguarding and uses the London Safeguarding Board procedures to guide staff in the event of a concern arising; training is provided to staff in the use of these procedures.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Support to adoptive families is an area that this agency has improved since the last inspection and the support services are now well established.

The approach to support is flexible and services can be provided by Harrow, via the ASK team, via Coram, via a service level agreement with the Post Adoption Centre, or by spot purchase from After Adoption; both of these services are registered adoption agencies subject to their own inspection and report.

There are written adoption support plans for each family. These are comprehensive documents that clearly set out: the current and likely future needs of the child and his adoptive family; how these needs will be met; who is responsible for ensuring the needs are met and they also include the details of any arrangements for contact with birth family members. For those Harrow children who need financial support so that their family can meet his or her needs, there is a formal assessment process for adoption allowances; these allowances are reviewed on an annual basis.

There is a clear programme of support available to families which include formal training and support groups during which there are useful discussions about issues relating to caring for adopted children who may have had adverse early life experiences. There is an annual party which means that adoptive families can meet together and adoptees meet with other children in a similar situation to them. A newsletter is sent out to families and this contains useful information. Adopters also have access to the West London Adoption Consortium's resources such as the black adopters support group. Inter-country adopters have access to all of these services.

There is good access to a range of specialist advisers. These include a proactive medical adviser who also sits on the adoption panel. Since the last inspection there are improved arrangements in respect to partnership working with health services. There is a children looked after specialist nurse co-located within the social work teams and a dedicated children and adolescent mental health worker who meets with social workers to provide advice and support. There is a play therapist who is attached to the placement service who can support placements when this is required. The arrangements for supporting children's educational needs are provided by a multi-agency approach between the social work services and educational specialists. These include an educational psychologist, virtual head teachers, a senior education welfare officer and a personal education plan co-ordinator. There is also good access to legal advice. Coram also provides the agency with advice about matters relating to adoption.

The support services are open to people who may have adopted or been adopted some years ago. There is a good response by the agency to ensure that issues are worked through and children and their families are supported in dealing with the wide ranging issues that arise as a result of their adopted status. This ranges from support with contact issues to support with identity issues for the child or young adult.

There have been no disruptions of adoptive placements since the last inspection and this is a good indicator that the quality of matching and the quality of the support provided to children and the adoptive families is good.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The support provided to birth parents is also an area that has improved since the last inspection. The child permanence reports for children record birth parents' views about adoption if they have expressed these and the adoption panel is particularly effective in helping social workers think about any additions that could be usefully added to these reports. Not all birth parents take up the opportunity to voice their views.

There are clear arrangements for ensuring that birth parents can access support independent of their child's social worker if they wish this. A counselling and support service is offered to parents either via Harrow's ASK team, via a service level

agreement with the Post Adoption centre or by spot purchasing a service from After Adoption. The take-up of these services has improved since the last inspection.

There is a clear understanding about the importance for the child in maintaining his or her heritage. There is now a formal approach taken to ensuring that life-story work and books are completed and are of a reasonable quality. In addition, in appropriate cases, contact arrangements are set up and these help to maintain a child's sense of his or her heritage and identity. Contact is more usually by the way of letterbox contact but also, for some children, by direct contact arrangements. The systems for managing and operating these arrangements are effective.

There are sound arrangements for providing a post adoption support service to birth relatives and adopted adults. These include birth records counselling and intermediary services. Examples seen show that this work is carried out with due regard to the sensitivities and complexities of this work.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

There is a clear written Statement of Purpose available to all interested parties that clearly sets out the services enquirers can expect. This document has minor shortfalls in its content; it does not include the address the agency operates from and is incorrect as it states that the manager is registered by Ofsted, he is not registered but he is nominated by the agency to manage the service. There are clear policies and procedures that underpin the current statement and usefully guide staff in their work. For children there is a child-friendly guide to adoption that is a useful tool for social workers and adoptive parents to use to help explain to the child what adoption means. All documents can be provided in a range of formats to ensure that all people can access them.

The information for domestic and inter-country adopters is informative and can be accessed on line via the Coram website for domestic adopters, and in hard copy in respect to inter-country adopters. The information is detailed and comprehensive.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Matters of equality and diversity are fully embedded in all practice and attitudes, the staff team is multi-cultural and the approach to matching ensures that children's diverse needs can be met. The agency welcomes all members of the community and all staff are aware of the importance of promoting difference and anti-discriminatory practice

The managers of the agency are skilled, experienced and qualified in children's and

adoption social work and they ensure that the agency is effectively and efficiently managed. The nominated manager is currently studying for a management qualification; he has good management experience.

Since the last inspection the arrangements for staffing the agency are well established. The staff team is stable and staff retention has been good. This has meant that shortfalls in respect to the experience of some staff have now been addressed as all have gained experience in adoption work over the past two years. An adopter commented, 'Our social worker listens to us and guides us....she is a very good support, a big help.' Staff say that they are well managed and supported by competent managers and that the formal support available to them through supervision, team meetings and training is of a good quality. They also access informal support from managers when they need it. The agency invests well in its staff, particularly in ensuring that they receive the right training at the right time. There are effective administrative systems in place and a dedicated staff team who support the social workers well in their work.

The partnership arrangements with Coram are well established and the two agencies work collaboratively together to ensure that children from Harrow, who are waiting for an adoptive placement, are speedily and appropriately placed. There is a real sense of partnership working between Harrow and Coram to achieve the best outcomes possible for Harrow children.

There are good arrangements for monitoring all aspect of the work, not least the partnership arrangements. The executive side of the council are kept well informed about the work of the agency, are child focused and take a well-informed approach to their monitoring role. The representatives from the council have an active interest in outcomes for Harrow children who are being adopted.

The arrangements for case recording are strong and ensure that all files, be they paper or electronic or for a child or adopters, are well maintained, accurate and securely stored. Policies and procedures govern the arrangements for accessing records which ensures that access is only granted to those with a right to have the information. There are sound arrangements for the archiving and retrieval of files which ensures that information will be available to adoptees about their adoption in the future, should they wish to access it.

Personnel files are made and maintained for staff, sessional workers and panel members. There are some shortfalls in the content of some of these files. None of the files viewed for any of the above categories contained a legible photo; in addition the file viewed for a sessional worker contained no evidence that ID had been sought for the worker, no evidence of the worker's qualifications, no evidence of General Social Care Council registration and while an in date Criminal Records Bureau check was on file this had not been carried out by Harrow. As sessional workers do not work with children the impact on the safety of children is minimal, however, the agency has not satisfied itself that sessional workers have the right qualifications, experience and qualities required to carry out complex assessment work with prospective adopters.

The premises the agency operates from are good. They are centrally located near to public transport, well-equipped and accessible. The agency has a continuity plan which ensures that in the event of the building or electronic systems being rendered unusable the work of the agency can continue.

What must be done to secure future 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 staff are fit to work for the purposes of an adoption service. This is with particular reference to ensuring that sessional staff are subject to the same robust recruitment and selection procedures as permanent members of staff (Breach of Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003, Regulation 11 (3))
- ensure that the Statement of Purpose contains all matters listed in Schedule 1. This is with particular reference to including the address of the agency (Breach of Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003, Regulation 2 (1))
- ensure that all assessments of prospective adopters are of an acceptable standard. This is with particular reference to obtaining references from each prospective adopters' employer (NMS 4.8)
- ensure the nominated manager has a suitable management qualification (NMS 14.2)
- ensure that files on sessional staff contain all of the required information. (NMS 20.11 and 28.2)