

# London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	Rossella Volpi / Rosemary Dancer
<b>Type of inspection</b>	Key

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<b>Setting address</b>	Barclay House, Effie Road, Fulham, London, SW6 1EN
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**Telephone number**

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**Registered person**

**Registered manager**

**Responsible individual**

**Date of last inspection**

London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham

Neil Elkins

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08/08/2006

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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

Hammersmith and Fulham's adoption service is located in a combined permanency and looked after children service, all of which is co-located in Fulham and serves the whole local authority. As well as domestic, inter-country and post adoption support, the service consists of three looked after children's teams, that generally work with children and families from pre-birth to 16 years, private fostering, kinship, family group conference service and business support. There are about 45 staff in all; eight posts are dedicated to adoption work and three and half to post adoption/permanency work. In addition there is one inter-country co-ordinator. There are two adoption and permanency teams, one of which leads on domestic adoption, the other covers kinship, post adoption/permanency, private fostering and inter-country adoption.

There are three looked after children teams with a total of 19 staff. Also located with this service in the same building are fostering services, the panel's support team, the virtual school and various health professionals, including both the psychologists and the looked after children nursing staff.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced inspection conducted by two inspectors, mostly over the course of one week. All key standards were considered in assessing the outcome areas.

This organisation has channelled much energy and resources to develop the service, with very good results. The adoption service is strong overall and the outcome area of enjoying and achieving is outstanding. Safeguarding and management are good, but there are outstanding features in both.

The safeguarding of children placed with or waiting for adoptive families is at the forefront of how the service is run. Equality and diversity are well embedded in all aspects of the operation.

The strategy to retain staff has enabled stability of social workers; consequently this has benefited families who are supported by professionals who know them well and are in a good position to make considered judgements about the best permanency solutions for the children.

The adoption panel is robust, child focused, diligent and acts as a good monitoring tool.

Both adoption and children social workers demonstrate a clear and deep understanding of adoption matters.

The adoption service is excellently managed. There is committed and well-informed scrutiny and support from the director of children's services and elected members.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

The previous inspection report in August 2006 details 11 recommendations or actions to be addressed by the adoption service.

Overall there is evidence that the service has taken all points seriously; has devoted effort and resources to improve the service consistently and is now providing a solidly strong service in all areas.

In particular, services to birth parents are now good. Personnel files contain the required information for panel members, but a recommendation has been made on the way staff files are organised.

The department has been restructured and the appropriate resources devoted to the adoption service, with excellent management arrangements. The adopters' recruitment strategy has been improved and is now well targeted towards attracting the families needed for the children waiting for adoptive placements. Life story work is receiving the appropriate attention.

Case files have been reviewed to ensure that they include the necessary information and they are audited. However, the system is presently changing to an electronic one and could not be fully assessed on this occasion.

### **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 safeguarding of children placed with, or waiting for, adoptive families is at the forefront of how the service is run.

All looked after children have a qualified designated social worker as do all adoptive families, up to and often beyond the granting of an adoption order. All looked after children reviews, child protection conferences, strategy meetings and disruption meetings are independently chaired. Once children are identified for adoption, there is good tracking of their care plan. All social workers receive training in safeguarding,

which is regularly updated, although not all administrative staff in the adoption service do so.

Adopters are involved in a formal, thorough and comprehensive assessment, preparation and approval process. They are checked to safeguard children placed in their care; there is analytical evidence about the prospective adopters' parenting capacity and good exploration of diversity issues. While written reports following assessments of prospective adopters may vary in quality, generally they are at least good enough to enable panel to make sound recommendations. There is good practice in conducting managerial second opinion's visits in all cases.

Assessments of inter-country adopters are equally thorough and involve appropriate and in depth exploration of cultural issues, as well as attachment and loss associated with moving to another country.

Prospective adopters report that they are welcomed without prejudice and overall are very satisfied with the service received. They commented, for example, that the assessing social workers were respectful, tactful, but very thorough. They said that they were well informed about what to expect and well prepared for attending panel. They referred to their social workers as 'excellent', 'brilliant' or 'diligent'. They said that the inter-country workers were 'fabulous' and remarked that all the workers: 'really understood us'; 'supported us all through the process'; and 'were very professional'.

Those who raised issues, were satisfied with the way the department responded. They said that management was open, listened carefully and supported them to raise any concern. This resulted in a very good service informed by their feedback. The department also receives many compliments from users.

Adopters consider that the agency's approach to matching is also very good. The matching process has strongly developed since the last inspection; it is clear about the needs of the children and targets, as far as possible, those who can best meet such needs; to this end, on occasions, there is fast-tracking of assessments of potential adopters.

There has been some success in attracting interest from black communities and although numbers are still small, this is well mitigated by other successful permanency solutions having been found for children. There has been a high rate of success in increasing permanency placements, including adoption, while placement disruptions have been uncommon, with none recently.

Adopters are usually fully informed about children who are being placed with them; including information about children's health, behaviour and family background. Overall the agency gives due consideration to prepare adopters well for their task and they are helped in becoming aware of the special needs of children whose care plan is adoption. Preparation groups cover the relevant topics; they are properly evaluated after each group and changed consistently with feedback received.

The panel process is professional and thorough. The panel's functioning is underpinned by appropriate policies and procedures and is guided in an excellent manner by the panel advisor. Members are diligent and conscientious and there is a range of appropriate personal and professional experience of adoption. It is chaired well by an independent, knowledgeable and skilled professional. Therefore, the panel acts as an effective and additional quality assurance mechanism regarding care planning, assessments and matching.

Decision making is thorough and takes into account all the relevant information, including panel minutes. It is set at a management level that is senior enough to enable objectivity and proper scrutiny, but that retains a strong awareness of adoption issues.

The agency has a thorough recruitment and vetting procedures for panel members, consistent with the expectations of the national minimum standards. Recruitment files for staff are not always organised in a way that gives clear evidence that all checks to assess suitability have been carried out or the reasons why exceptions are made.

### **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is outstanding.

People affected by adoption receive support services which they greatly value, bring tangible benefits and have resulted in outstanding outcomes for some adoptive families. The work is guided by support assessments, which are reviewed periodically to ensure that they continue to meet needs well.

Adopted adults were effusive about how sensitively and helpfully the work is conducted; how quickly the authority responds; how effective the post adoption service is in following up requests for birth record counselling or intermediary work. They commented: 'They helped me in any way they could; you are not a number here, they really care for you'. 'All has been very good and all workers are very welcoming'. 'I get the impression that the social worker really cares and is truly interested in my history'.

Adopters are well prepared for the task and receive very good information regarding the child coming to live with them. To this end, the work of the medical advisor who offers to meet all adopters being considered for a match, to discuss potential health issues, is an asset. Adopters also very much value the work of their assessing social workers who continue to support them until and often beyond the making of an adoption order.

There has been a major investment in the development of the adoption support service since the last inspection, including the expansion of the staff team, to provide a significant number of services directly or in conjunction with other professional partners.

Recognition is given to the importance of transition, with an exceptional level of support into this area. There is a range of specialist resources available to adopted children and their families, including psychological, medical and mental health services.

Overall, adoptive families have very good access to a wide range of support services in relation to both physical and psychological well-being. There are positive links between the permanency and looked after children services as a whole, which incorporates all adoption services, the teenage pregnancy team and the drugs and alcohol team. Psychological support is offered in various forms, such as play therapy and cognitive systemic therapy. Specific psychological support to children engaged in life story work is often considered. Professionals also acknowledge the excellent contribution made by the psychotherapy service in achieving placement stability.

The education of all children, coupled with a stable and supportive home life is recognised as critical for looked after children to enjoy and achieve. Hammersmith and Fulham are committed to providing these foundation elements for adopted children also.

There are a number of other support mechanisms, such as training, group meetings and a buddy system; there are social events which have been well attended and which have provided opportunities for the whole family to meet with other adoptive families.

Inter-country adopters can access any of the universal support services that the agency offers. The outreach counselling and support service have been well used. Inter-country adopters may also access the services provided by the inter-country adoption centre, which includes groups and training on a range of issues. In addition there is a specific picnic, a new year party and a mentor scheme for inter-country adoptive families.

Overall, adopters now benefit from a cohesive and consistent approach to ensure that children are able to fulfil their potential within their adoptive placements. An adopter commented that the success of the placement and the excellent outcomes for the child are greatly due to the support they had been offered over a protracted period.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

The adoption agency supports birth parents and families well. For example, birth parents receive a service that strongly recognises the life-long implications of adoption and that continues as long as it is required. An external adoption support agency provides choice, a flexible and responsive service and independent counselling to birth families. There is a energy and commitment in this area of work and it is continuously reviewed to make it meets the needs of service users. This is bearing some results; for example, in obtaining birth parents' views about adoption



plans and information to help with life story work.

Direct contact arrangements are well set out and supported. Letter box contact is effectively managed; much help and advice is offered to all parties to ensure that letters are thoughtfully written and time-scales adhered to, so as to minimise distress for birth families or children.

Investment has been made to develop experience and expertise in life-story work. As a result, children's social workers now feel confident in this area of work; they convey a strong recognition of the importance of working with birth families and of how crucial it is for children to maintain their heritage. They acknowledge the guidance and specialist advice they receive from the adoption team and the training and resources made available by the authority to support them in this area. There are good examples of life story books and appropriate supportive steps continue to be taken towards achieving consistent and good quality in children's permanence reports.

The stability of the children's social work team means that social workers usually know children well. This allows important first-hand information about birth families to be shared well and contribute to the effective matching of children to adopters.

The importance of contact, heritage and positive identity formation are well considered during assessments and reviewed by the panel.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

This authority demonstrates that consistent commitment, energy and resources are channelled into the development of the service, with very good results. The service manager and the staff team share an ethos of reviewing all that is already good enough, to make it better and more responsive to changing needs. The agency has skilled, experienced and enthusiastic social work staff and team leaders who work well with the service users and support them with sensitivity and respect. There are good training opportunities provided, although social workers do not always have the time to take advantage of what is on offer. Adoption and children's social workers work well in partnership and there is a strong ethos of wanting to achieve the best possible outcomes for families.

There are robust mechanisms in place to both monitor and guide the work; this enhances practice and gives proper scrutiny. This is done in a way that enables

social workers to use their professionalism, judgement and propose creative solutions. There have been excellent retention strategies that have achieved stability both in the adoption and looked after children's teams. Social workers confirm that they feel safe, are able to use their skills and there are opportunities for career progression.

There is good administrative support for the panel. The administrative support for the adoption teams is not specialised enough in adoption work to be effective, although individual workers are considered to be very helpful.

The expertise and calibre of management is well demonstrated by the development of the service since the last inspection. Management has driven significant improvements to benefit users, consistently with identified needs and trends. There is high regard for the adoption service management from staff, senior management and elected members. Members are well informed on adoption matters and convey commitment and drive to ensure that the service is conducted in a way to enable children to have the best possible futures.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. In particular, there is a strong ethos of inclusion of birth families and recognition of the importance for adopted children of maintaining heritage. There is good analysis of cultural issues and good exploration of diversity in the assessments, including inter-country adoption assessments. Adopters are well prepared for meeting individual and special needs and are supported in doing this well by a range of specialist professionals. There are clear guidelines for staff in working with black children and their families in fostering and adoption and this is linked to safeguarding.

There is a clearly written statement of the aims and objectives of the adoption agency and management has been successful in ensuring that the work is consistent with those aims. A range of information about the agency's responsibilities is well put together. For example, the agency provides clear written information for prospective adopters and they confirm that is comprehensive and suitable to apprise them on all relevant areas. There is good information for children, but the children's guide does not contain all that is required by regulation.

## **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):

- review the terminology used on documentation to clearly demonstrate that the agency is making a decision, rather than approving panel's recommendations (NMS 13)
- reorganise staff recruitment files to ensure that there is clear evidence of all

checks conducted to assess suitability or for the reasons why exceptions are made (NMS 19)

- ensure that the children's guide to adoption contains all the information required by regulation (NMS 1)
- provide training in safeguarding for administrative staff and ensure that they are knowledgeable enough about adoption work to be effective in their support of the adoption social workers. (NMS 20)