

London Borough of Richmond upon Thames Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Paul Clark
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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 adoption service of the London Borough of Richmond operates as the adoption and permanency team which has a full time team manager, 4.9 whole time equivalent social workers and a full time administrator who also serves as the adoption panel administrator.

The service includes the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters and also undertakes the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters. There is post adoption support to adopters and to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, which includes birth records counselling and intermediary work. There are also arrangements for the independent counselling and support of birth parents and families through an independent agency. A letterbox system, which supports the exchange of information between birth parents and children in adoption placements, is also provided and maintained. In addition, the service also supports post adoption contact, where necessary. Although the council previously offered a service to inter-country adopters, this work has now been contracted out.

There is an independently chaired adoption panel which deliberates on the social work assessments of proposed adopters, the suitability of children to be adopted, and the matching of children with approved adopters. The panel submits its recommendations to an agency decision maker who will make decisions about final approval.

The service is part of the South West London Adoption Consortium.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This announced, full inspection found that the adoption and permanency team at The London Borough of Richmond upon Thames provide a good level of service to children who are adopted, adoptive parents and those people affected by adoption. Some areas of the service are outstanding. Most notably, the post-adoptive support is excellent. Evidence of the verbal enquiries that follow up written references need to be recorded on staff personnel files.

Improvements since the last inspection

The service has updated the health and safety checklist since the time of the last inspection and it is now a comprehensive and complete checklist. The registered

manager now regularly audits the quality of records. Case records are now signed and dated by the author.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

There are no National Minimum Standards that relate to this outcome group.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

There are robust systems and policies in place to ensure that children and adopters are appropriately matched. Children's needs and suitability to be adopted are thoroughly assessed by social workers and considered by the adoption panel and ratified by the agency decision maker. Prospective adopters are recruited, assessed and prepared for their roles by social workers in the adoption team. Prospective adopters will be sought and recruited for those children with particular and specific needs through national adoption registers and local advertising. Identified social workers within the team take on what they describe as a 'family finding' role to try to find the best match between child and prospective adopters. Assessing social workers for approved adopters present their recommendations to the adoption panel together with the child's social worker. Birth parents are consulted by 'family finders' about their view of the proposed placement. The service does not currently hold 'child appreciation days' to gather a wider range of information about a child which would further prepare potential adopters for a particular child. After rigorous deliberation by the panel a recommendation is made to the agency decision maker. The recommendation is ratified or further information is called for. Suitable arrangements are made by way of information giving, introduction and induction such that both child and adopters can make an informed decision about a proposed adoption plan continuing. These good matching systems ensure that children will be placed with adopters who can best meet their needs and will minimise the risk of placement breakdown and the distress that this may cause to children and adopters. There have been no adoption disruptions within the past 12 months.

The preparation of adopters is full and comprehensive. Although there is no duty social worker telephone line, enquirers expressing an interest in adopting are contacted by phone by a social worker within 24 hours and are given preliminary information. They are sent information packs, they have access to an information website page, they are invited to attend an information evening, and they receive a home visit by a qualified social worker. If applicants are deemed suitable they will be offered attendance at a preparation course. Preparation courses are held annually. The council are now giving potential adopters the opportunity to attend courses held by other councils within the South West London Adoption Consortium in order to avoid a long wait in attending a course. The British Association of Adoption and Fostering assessment process also serves as preparation and guidance for

adopters. The thorough assessment and preparation of adopters within the council helps to ensure that children receive high quality care by people who have a clear understanding of their role and function.

The adoption panel's constitution, role and function are clearly spelt out in a written document and in the authority's Statement of Purpose. It is independently chaired and it has members with legal, medical and educational expertise. There are members with personal experience of adoption, and members from minority ethnic groups. Members receive necessary training and their contribution to the panel and their personal development needs are effectively reviewed. The panel meets every month and its recommendations are referred to the agency decision maker and responded to in a timely manner. The panel chair conducts an annual review of the panel's function which identifies areas of development. These rigorous steps to the approval and review of carers ensure that the function of the adoption service is effectively checked and scrutinised to mitigate the possibility of children being adopted by inappropriate people.

All social work staff working for the service have a professional social work qualification and registration with the General Social Care Council. All panel members, management and staff have been subject to the appropriate vetting and recruitment procedures which helps to ensure that they are suitable to work with children. Written references on applicants are followed up verbally. However, records of verbal enquiries are not added to staff personnel files.

The council has a robust complaints procedure. A record of complaints received about the service in 2010 is in place. Two complaints have been received within the past twelve months and the actions taken by the service were appropriate in each case.

Policies are in place to safeguard and protect service users. The council operates a 'letterbox' system for agreed periodic contact/communication between children and their birth parents/relatives where this can reasonably be done. This is appropriately safeguarded and staff operating this service have been trained so that they understand how to keep the children involved safe.

There is a policy on discouraging adopters from smoking and children under 10 are not placed with adopters who smoke. There is a policy directing adopters away from the physical chastisement of adopted children. The council has updated its health and safety checklist of potential adopter's households and social workers now undertake a comprehensive assessment of the safety of households.

All staff working for the service receive training on the council's 'safeguarding children' policy and potential adopters are introduced to the policy as part of their preparation training. There are workers within the adoption team who carry out, and have expertise in, supporting adopted people seeking their birth records. The council also has service level agreements with two local adoption support agencies to provide both birth parent counselling and support to adopted people who are seeking

their birth records. These systems and services help to promote the emotional well-being of people affected by adoption.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Adoptive parents are well supported by a range of services provided by the authority. Pre-approval these include a website information page, the provision of a comprehensive information pack, information evenings, home visits by social workers and preparation groups. The assessment and approval process provides extensive information about the reality of adoption including the long term effects of birth trauma and attachment and loss on children. Following approval and after a child and proposed adopters have been matched, an adoption support plan is made which outlines how the needs of the young person to be placed, and the needs of the adoptive parents will be met. These plans are properly reviewed.

There are specialist social workers within the adoption and permanency team who will give direct support to adopters. Monthly drop-in support groups for adopters are held where they can access professional advice. There is also a 'parenting group' (for adoptive parents) that offers support with aspects of parenting adopted children. There are three evening workshops held per annum and an annual conference which look at broader issues affecting adoption and there is an annual social event for adopters and adopted children. There is a periodic newsletter giving information and advice to adopters. The adoption team have access to an educational psychologist who offers support to adopters. There is a resource library available for adopters. All adopters are provided with membership of Adoption UK and access to its 'buddy' scheme. Adopters may access the authorities in-house training events for its staff. The effective support given to adoptive parents further mitigates the likelihood of placement breakdown and helps to ensure children are placed in a secure family setting.

The service organises separate support groups for younger children and for teenagers that provide social events and the opportunity for children to raise any issues they may have about adoption. The adoption service can access psychiatric and psychology support by referring young people to the local child and adolescent mental health services team. The service also has access to a private psychotherapist and has a service level agreement with a local adoption support agency to provide counselling support for adopters and young people and all those affected by adoption. Later life letters and life story work with children is carried out by placing social workers who can receive the specialist help they may need from the adoption support workers within the team. As previously stated, the council has service level agreements with local adoption support agencies to provides counselling and support to birth parents whose children are adopted and to adopted people who are seeking their birth records. These services help to promote the emotional well-being of those people affected by adoption.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The adoption service consults birth parents at all relevant points during the matching and adoption process including matters that pertain to ethnic, cultural and religious matters. Parental views about the intended adoption of their child and proposed adopters are taken into account unless they negatively affect the best interests of the child. Birth parents whose children are adopted are offered support and counselling from an adoption support agency commissioned by the authority.

As previously stated, there is a 'letterbox' system in place which enables adoptive families, birth parents and other family members to maintain contact when practical. A social worker within the adoption team is the coordinator of this service and is well trained in supporting birth and adoptive parents to construct letters and other methods of contact and in employing an effective methodology to prevent inappropriate information being exchanged that might impact on a child's wellbeing.

Children's adoption support plans are clearly written and contain full assessments of children's needs and detail the actions necessary to support them in the transition to their adoptive homes and the ongoing support they require. Potential adopters are given full information about a child's background including their medical history.

Wherever possible a meeting is arranged between birth parents and adopters to provide a degree of accord about the placement. The consultation with parents and the promotion of agreed contact between birth families, adoptive families and adopted children helps to ensure the long term well-being of adopted children and birth families.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

There are no National Minimum Standards that relate to this outcome group.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. This is evidenced, in part, by the range of staff, panel members and adopters from differing racial and cultural backgrounds. Some panel members have personal experience of adoption. There are a small number of 'same sex' couples and single people who have been approved as adopters, evidencing the non-discriminatory approach of the service. The recruitment process prioritises potential adopters who express an interest in adopting a disabled child.

The council has corporate policies on equality and diversity and disability equality, and staff are aware of the detail of these policies. The Statement of Purpose of the adoption service also has a commitment within its aims and objectives that 'the service will respond appropriately to equality and diversity issues'.

A clearly written and comprehensive Statement of Purpose is in place, which was reviewed in April 2010. Adopters are provided with clear written information about the service at the recruitment stage and this is fully explained to them at preparation group training and further reiterated by assessing social workers throughout the assessment process. The service has received good quality commendations from a recognised authority for the standard of its children's guides which are full and complete and written in formats suitable for both younger and older children and for children who may require information in symbol form.

The manager is suitably qualified in both social work and management. She has many years experience in child care practice and management. All social work practitioners within the service are professionally qualified and are members of the General Social Care Council. Supervision for practitioners is given monthly. Team meetings are held fortnightly. Staff comment that they feel well supported by management. Staff working within the service undertake relevant ongoing training to ensure that they maintain and expand their knowledge base. All staff and management undertake an annual review of their personal development and training needs. Ninety per cent of the social work staff have achieved the post qualifying award in social work. The service has sufficient well-qualified staff to meet the identified adopter recruitment and approval plans of the service. The level of staffing and staff training in place provides children and adopters with good social work support.

The case records of children and adoptive parents are clearly written, comprehensive and up to date. There are good systems in place for the management and monitoring of records. The archive arrangements for the storage of children's adoption records ensure that these records are kept safely and securely. A disaster recovery plan is in place for these records.

The adoption service undertakes an annual review and a written report is produced which identifies areas for development. This is presented to the council's corporate parenting panel who take an active role in the quality assurance of the service. This thorough ongoing review of policy and practice ensures that children receive the best possible service.

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 the verbal enquiries following up written references on staff are recorded on the personnel files of staff. (NMS 15.2)