

London Borough of Tower Hamlets 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 Tower Hamlets operates an adoption service that undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current adoption legislation and regulations including those relating to adoptions with a foreign element. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters. They also include the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters and providing support for these placements. The service also provides post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, including support for birth parents, birth records counselling and intermediary work. It provides adoption support services directly and through commissioning arrangements with voluntary agencies. In addition, the service operates and maintains a letter box system.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced inspection of the adoption service. The purpose of the inspection was to evaluate its performance against the adoption national minimum standards. All the standards were inspected under the outcome areas of staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and organisation. The adoption service's promotion of equality and diversity was also inspected.

This is a good adoption service with significant strengths in some areas. It has a clear focus on providing good outcomes for children through adoption. It has effective systems to plan and direct adoption work. These help the authority to find well matched adoptive families for children in a timely manner. Good information is provided about children when adoption plans are being considered. However, child permanence reports are not consistently good enough to provide clear, accessible information for children's reference in later life. The service undertakes thorough assessments of prospective adopters. The assessment and preparation process prepares adopters well to look after children. The authority's procedure covering the assessment process does not correctly reflect practice in relation to assessments of people who have applied to adopt a specific child. The adoption panel gives good scrutiny to assessments and plans for children. This supports the authority's decision making process. However, letters to adopters notifying them of the agency's decision do not make the decision making process sufficiently clear.

The authority provides good support to people affected by adoption. It works well with partner agencies to provide individualised and effective support to people who need it. Birth parents are offered very good support. The agency works hard to engage with them to offer support and to seek their views about the adoption of their children. The work of the authority to help children understand their

background, heritage and life story is outstanding. Creative, innovative and structured work in this area is well embedded within the authority. This ensures that life story work is undertaken for all children and that high quality life story books are produced in a format that reflects current best practice.

The adoption service produces good information for all parties to the adoption process about the work it does although the children's guide does not contain all the required information. The adoption service is well equipped to successfully undertake the work it does. Adoption workers are experienced and well managed both strategically and operationally.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection a number of recommendations were made to improve the adoption service.

It was required to ensure that correctly structured files are created for children in adoption proceedings and for adopters from other agencies in interagency cases. It was also required to ensure that the suitability of all staff is properly checked and that the files of panel members contain all the required information. The service has addressed all these requirements.

It was also recommended that the authority undertake a range of actions to improve its service. These included the need to improve some aspects of the assessment of prospective adopters, to improve records of some aspects of panel minutes and the agency decision and to develop a children's guide for younger children. The service has acted to improve its practice in these areas. It has also improved its health and safety checklist for prospective adopters' homes by making it more wide-ranging in the matters covered. The service has not fully addressed a recommendation relating to the need to improve the content of the letter notifying parties of the agency decision. Consequently, this recommendation is repeated.

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 adoption service has an effective adoptive parent recruitment strategy. This strategy is based upon good, early information about the needs of children for whom adoption may be the plan and a sound knowledge of the borough's demography. Recruitment activity considers the needs of children and specific efforts are made to recruit from different community groups. The suitability of people to adopt is considered on an inclusive basis, irrespective of applicant's race, sexuality, disability

or marital status. The service responds to enquiries promptly and provides good information and counselling for prospective adopters.

The service undertakes thorough preparation, training and assessment of prospective adopters. As a consequence, approved adopters are well prepared to meet the needs of children placed with them. Assessment reports are accurate, well written, evaluative and provide the adoption panel with the necessary information on which to make its recommendations. One adopter said that their assessment report was 'insightful' and 'accurate'. Adopters are well supported during and after the assessment process. Preparation training includes input from a birth parent and is of high quality. However, the service's procedure regarding the assessment of applicants who apply to adopt a specific child is not consistent with its current practice and this could potentially lead to an incorrect assessment process being followed.

The authority has clear procedures for sharing information between children's social work teams and the adoption team. This enables potential matches for children who may need adoption to be considered early and helps reduce delay. Family finders for children are allocated early and adoption and field social work staff work together well to find adoptive families and arrange matches between children and adopters. The authority works closely with the local adoption consortium and refers to the adoption register as necessary to find adoptive parents for children for whom there are no appropriate adopters locally. Matching decisions are clearly recorded and robustly made. Consequently, the authority's children who require adoptive families are matched and placed with suitable, well prepared and well matched adopters and generally in a timely manner. The authority is working hard to improve the quality of its child permanence reports. These provide the agency with enough information to make key adoption decisions. However, they are not consistently of good enough quality in terms of content or style for reference by an adopted child in later life.

The adoption panel is correctly constituted and well managed. It undertakes its responsibilities thoroughly. It gives good consideration to the reports submitted and makes clear recommendations on cases along with the reasons for these. Decision making is effective and timely. However, letters to adopters conveying the agency's decision do not make the process of the decision making clear.

The managers and staff of the agency are suitably experienced in adoption and appropriately qualified. Adoption staff understand the adoption process and its consequences. They clearly focus on promoting the well-being of children. The authority's recruitment procedures are rigorous and ensure that staff and panel members are suitable people with the appropriate qualifications to carry out their roles.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

This adoption service provides good support to people whose lives have been touched by adoption. It works with other agencies and services to provide flexible support based on the individually assessed needs of the people involved. The adoption support service engages closely with health and therapeutic professionals, children's social workers and independent providers to meet people's need for support. Good support including tracing, birth records counselling, intermediary work and birth parent support is provided by the service and by a commissioned service with an adoption support agency. The letterbox arrangements for maintaining contact between adopted children and their birth families are managed effectively. The authority has good monitoring arrangements that ensure appropriate levels of service are being provided through commissioned agencies.

Children placed for adoption and their adoptive families are well prepared. The service provides clear information about the support available to prospective adopters. Introductions of children to their new families are well managed and high levels of support are provided to adoptive families and their new children after placements are made. Visits and reviews take place in a timely manner and adopters are provided with support to make their application for the adoption order when appropriate. The service works well to provide support, advice, guidance and direct input to adoptive families on an ongoing basis to ensure that children's well-being is promoted.

Specialist advice and support resources are readily accessible. Medical and legal advice is of good quality and always provided at panel. Other resources and specialist services are sourced whenever necessary.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The service recognises the significance of children's backgrounds and histories and how important they are in children's understanding of themselves and their place in the world. As a consequence it makes impressively innovative arrangements to ensure that information about the child's past is captured and provided to them. It has very good arrangements to support birth parents and families. Social workers work hard to engage them in providing information and their views to support the adoption process. Work with birth families includes seeking their views, wherever possible, about the sort of family they would prefer for their children and these are taken into account when matches are considered.

The agency regards life story work for children being adopted as very important. Structured and well resourced arrangements are embedded within the authority's organisation by which information about the child's life story is gathered, recorded and presented to them. These arrangements are effective and support some

excellent and creative practice in working with birth families to gain information. For example, the authority uses its well established family group conference process to maintain relationships with family members in order to help birth families share information about the child's background and family. Referrals for life story work are made in respect of every child. Once received meetings take place between professionals, foster carers, adopters and birth families wherever possible to gather and compile information. Work takes place with older children to help them prepare for their adoption and life work is offered post adoption wherever it is needed to support children in their adoptive families. As a consequence of this significant commitment, all adopted children receive a life story book. These books are of excellent quality. They are detailed, contain photographs and mementos and are carefully written in a sensitive manner designed to help children understand their past and to attach to their new families. The work done in this area by the authority is outstanding and demonstrates its clear focus on the continued well-being of the children it places for adoption.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service recruits adopters from a diverse range of backgrounds to meet the different needs of children who need adoptive families. Assessments of prospective adopters consider applicants' abilities to respect and promote diversity and preparation training is delivered in a way that challenges prejudice and preconception. The service works hard to ensure that children are matched with adopters who are able to meet their needs and where possible reflect their background and heritage. The authority strives to locate the most appropriate family for each individual child whether they are from within the authority or elsewhere. It provides good adoption support to all people whose lives have been touched by adoption. Its work to help children understand their life stories and the work it undertakes with birth families demonstrates its respect for each individual affected by adoption.

The organisation has a Statement of Purpose in place which, accurately and in detail, describes the adoption service. The adoption service has two children's guides; one for older children and one for younger children. They are colourful, well presented and contain helpful information about the adoption process. Neither of these guides contains the name, address and telephone number of the children's rights director. The service began to address this omission as soon as it was brought to their attention. The service also provides children with a guide to adoption support services.

The management of the adoption service, at a strategic and operational level, is effective. Adoption processes are well monitored and managed and this ensures that children with a plan for adoption are found suitable and well prepared families in a timely manner. Adoption staff and their managers are well trained and supported, committed to their roles and work to a high standard. The service provides its staff with very good direct support. Training and development opportunities for staff are good with access to both internal and external training courses. Relationships between the adoption service and child's social worker is good and this helps planning for children. The service operates within a comprehensive set of policies and procedures. However, as stated earlier the assessment procedure does not make the process for assessing applicants who apply to adopt a named child sufficiently clear.

Adoption records are of good order. Effective arrangements exist to ensure that any records relating to children's adoption are maintained with appropriate confidentiality. The service operates from suitable premises with appropriate storage arrangements and information systems in place.

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 adopters are given accurate, up-to-date and full written information to help them understand the need and background of the child. Specifically, that child permanence reports are of consistently good quality for later life reference (NMS 5.2)
- ensure that the agency has arrangements to convey its decision in writing to the approved adopters. Specifically, that letters make the process of approval clear (NMS 13.3)
- ensure that the children's guide contains the name, address and telephone number of the Children's Rights Director (breach of Regulation 3 (1) of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003)
- ensure that there are clear written procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the adoption agency. Specifically, that procedures relating to the assessment of adopters reflects current practice. (NMS 17.1)