

London Borough of Camden Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Rossella Volpi
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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

Camden's Adoption Service is delivered by the adoption and permanence team which currently has its office premises in Eversholt Street. The team is located within the children, schools and families directorate, in the family services and social work division. The assistant director of safeguarding and social care has overall responsibility for the adoption service and also acts as agency decision maker. The service is overseen by the principal officer for resources, who supervises the work of the adoption and permanence team manager.

The agency provides a comprehensive adoption service in line with its statutory responsibilities. This includes matching and placing children in need of adoptive families; recruiting, preparing, assessing and approving adoptive families; providing assessments for, and a variety of, post adoption support to adoptive children and families; counselling and support to birth families; assistance and counselling to adopted adults who wish to see their birth records; intermediary services including tracing and reunions and assistance with indirect and direct contact arrangements. Inter-country assessments are carried out by a voluntary adoption agency on Camden's behalf.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This is a particularly inclusive service, free of stereotype or fear and delivered with much confidence and knowledge.

This agency demonstrates a strong commitment to meeting the needs of all children waiting for adoption. While all prospective adopters are welcomed without prejudice, the paramount consideration remains to attract and prioritise families who can best meet the needs of the children coming up for adoption.

Camden offers a range of excellent services to individual adoptive families and supports adopters well to provide stable and permanent homes for the children placed. The service offered to adopted adults is comprehensive and delivered sensitively.

There is a strong philosophy of including birth parents and to offer a service that fully recognises the loss and traumas that they experience and their needs. Birth parents are encouraged to contribute to life story work and to meet adopters and are offered independent counselling and support. There is renewed and strong emphasis on life story work, based on the involvement of birth parents and consultation with adopters. Direct and indirect contact arrangements are well set out and sensitively

supported.

This is a well managed agency, particularly strong in formal and informal supervision and in taking collective responsibility for the delivery of a service focused on the needs of children. The agency has skilled and experienced social work staff.

Some management strategies are under-developed, for example in relation to engaging harder to reach birth parents or evaluating new initiatives. There is a lack of formal evaluation and action plans, at times, following case review and, therefore, there is scarce evidence of the lessons learned or of how the agency intends to prevent similar situations from reoccurring. The information in some policies is either not clear or not complete, such as, for example, in the safeguarding policy or in the children's guides. Applications from adopters are taken, at times, after preparation has commenced and this impinges both on time scales and on representation rights. Written documentation does not reflect that the decision maker is making her own independent decision, although practice is good.

Improvements since the last inspection

The previous inspection report of July 2006 details five requirements and 18 recommendations to be addressed by the adoption service.

Overall there is evidence that Camden has taken all points seriously and, as a result, has successfully improved the service consistently with the inspection findings.

In particular, there is good management scrutiny and support on the day-to-day that has ensured better consistency and quality of assessments. Case files are audited to ensure that they include the necessary information. The staffing arrangements have been reviewed and training has been put in place, as required, to ensure that staff are well guided and competent for all areas of the adoption work that they undertake. Policies have been amended to better guide or reflect the work of the adoption service and to ensure that some specific processes, for example relating to the work of the panel, decision making or specialist advisors, are conducted consistently with legal expectations or good practice guidelines.

Personnel files contain the required information for panel members and staff and there are mechanisms in place to ensure that all staff and managers achieve or maintain the relevant qualifications for their posts.

The recruitment plan to broaden the range of adopters for the children who need families has continued to be developed and responses received from any adoption publicity are now monitored to inform future practice.

The importance of transition is fully recognised and much investment has been channelled in ways to support this well, including a more proactive approach in engaging birth families in the adoption process and in gathering information for the child on the family background. The adoption support service has been developed and is now providing a good service overall both to adoptive families and birth

relatives.

The recommendation regarding life appreciation days has not been met; but there is recognition that they are a useful means to ensure that all available information on children is shared and recorded and there are plans to start implementing this soon.

The adoption panel sits at appropriate intervals consistently with the work that it needs to consider, ensuring no undue delays.

The adoption and permanence team moved to the current premises in October 2007, which are suitable for the purpose; the archiving system has also been progressed to meet the requirements.

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.

Camden has a good strategy for recruitment and creative use of a limited budget, which has resulted in successful campaigns leading to the approval of suitable adopters. While the recruitment of black adopters and families of mixed heritage remains a challenge, the agency has been able to increase interest from more diverse backgrounds to meet the needs of children from different cultures and has been able to place some older children.

Adopters report that when they approach Camden they are treated with respect and empathy and generally receive good and realistic information. Single adopters and same sex couples particularly report how encouraging Camden has been in welcoming them; some said that Camden's reputation of being sensitive and non-judgemental attracted them to make initial enquiries.

Adopters expressed good satisfaction with the recruitment, assessment and matching process and spoke particularly highly about their assessing social workers, using words such as: 'professional', 'warm' or 'empathic', to describe their assessors. They said that the staff involved skilfully guided them through the process and helped them gain insight into what would be required. Adopters commented that the assessments reports were: 'easy to read, free of jargon and reflected us.' They pointed out that by the end of the assessment their social worker: 'knew us so well and this helped with the matching as she knew the types of children we could best offer a placement to'.

Both the information evening and preparation training are said by adopters to be very useful. In particular they have found valuable to hear first hand the experiences

of adoptive parents and the sessions about attachment and behaviour.

The application from adopters is not always taken before preparation starts. Such practice impinges on the right of adopters to make representations, should they be considered unsuitable or encouraged to withdraw during the preparation course. It also distorts the timescales for assessments in that commencement of assessment is taken from when the application is received. Furthermore, even when applicants are counselled out after a formal application, there is not always evidence that they have been advised of their rights to make representations.

Overall children benefit from a service which endeavours to assess adopters thoroughly and has devoted resources, in the last couple of years, to make assessment reports more analytical, based on evidence and more consistent in quality. As a result, assessments are now considered to be good, with clear evidence about the prospective adopters parenting capacity; quality and diversity issues are addressed and evidenced. However, there is not always evidence that all vulnerabilities have been considered with the adopters, although the gaps are not significant enough to prevent panel from making a recommendation, at times with informal advice on how to address such gaps. Second opinion visits are carried out routinely and all appropriate checks and references are undertaken, including the completion of a comprehensive health and safety check list.

There is a well considered and thorough approach to deciding on the most suitable family for a child. Adoption workers and children's social workers work well in partnership and this has been supported by the stability of workers in both teams. This has helped in ensuring that important information on children, families and heritage is not lost and also that the children's social work team gets a good degree of knowledge and skills in adoption work. Managers meet every six weeks to look at the tracking of children subject to care proceedings in order to identify and avoid delay and drift.

Transition planning has been improved so that all children have as much information as possible regarding the adopters. Transitions are tailored to every child to ensure that their individual needs are met and there have been a number of creative ways to do so with very young children also, that adopters report to have been successful in helping the placement to settle well and to become a family. However, adopters also raised that foster carers preparation about the transition of young children into the adoptive family had not always equipped the carers well for the move.

The quality of assessments and the matching of suitable families to children are appropriately scrutinised by the agency decision maker. The function is at a senior enough level to enable objectivity and authority to take action in response to issues arising. Decisions are formally conveyed in writing to adopters and birth parents, but the wording in some documentation does not reflect that the agency is making the decision.

Decision making takes proper account of the recommendations of the adoption panel. Such recommendations are made after proper consideration of all available

information by panel members who are diligent, child focused and have the right expertise for their role. There is good emphasis on culture and race, commitment to promotion of equality and thorough exploration that children would be safe in their placements and their needs well met. There is an experienced and well regarded chair; both adopters and social workers commented that the scrutiny and questions are appropriate and that their anxiety is reduced by the way the chair conducts the panel process and the efforts she puts into making them feel at ease. The panel is well supported by the appointed advisors and minute taking.

The agency has a thorough recruitment and vetting procedure for staff and panel members, consistent with the expectations of the national minimum standards.

All social workers and managers in the adoption service are trained and knowledgeable about child protection. However, the safeguarding policy is not clear enough and the wording is such that if followed, it would pose a risk that inappropriate decisions could be made.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Camden offers a range of excellent services to individual adoptive families, directly or in conjunction with other professional partners. Such support is offered as long as needed for adopters in Camden and is informed by continuous research and review into crucial factors, such as, for example, attachment and siblings' placements.

Service users gave strong examples of the support received and how it helped them to maintain the placement or to address children's needs. For example, it enabled access to the right school or to psychological services. Users conveyed much regard for the adoption support workers and made comments such as: 'very knowledgeable'; 'they go the extra mile'.

Adopters are offered comprehensive training to prepare them to meet the needs of the children in their care, but the feedback from adopters on the quality of such training is mixed. Individual plans are drawn up to support the specific issues within placement. However, not all adopters are clear of their adoption support plans and there is also some lack of clarity about financial support.

All adopters have the opportunity to meet with the carer and any other relevant professionals and specialists, who have been working with the child. The input of all the specialist advisors is much valued by adopters; in particular that of the medical advisor, who offers to meet all adopters being considered for a match, to discuss potential health issues. Adopters value the information from foster carers and their contribution to the introduction process; but they say that at times the carers do not handle the transition well, as referred to in the report, under 'staying safe'.

Camden holds an annual social event for adopters where good informal links are made between adopters and children. The event is well attended and the feedback is

positive. There are some support groups for adopters, but these are not meeting their needs well. Adopters commented that there is lack of suitable, local support groups and, in particular, for adopters of young children. This is a gap that the adoption service had already identified and is planning to address.

Camden offers a comprehensive service to adopted adults. This includes counselling, intermediary work, tracing and reunions. The work is carried out sensitively and service users' welfare is considered and promoted.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

There is a strong philosophy of including birth parents and to offer them services that do not underestimate the possible levels of anger or rejection. Efforts are made to ensure that birth parents are supported through all stages of the adoption process and to enable them to participate in the planning and placement of their child. Independent support and counselling is offered to birth parents and Camden has agreements with specialist organisations for this work, as well as the service that can be offered through the adoption team. Birth parents are encouraged to contribute to life story work and to meet with adopters.

When birth parents engage, the individual work conducted is excellent. However, management strategy is not fully developed to consider and efficiently address how to connect with those harder to reach birth parents, such as those who may have moved away or those who have not engaged early.

Adopters are well prepared and knowledgeable on the importance for the child of contact with birth families and support this well. Direct and indirect contact arrangements are well set out. Appropriate 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. Overall the importance of this, as crucial to maintain heritage and for the well-being of the child is well considered and usually skilfully managed. When the arrangement had not been well managed, the department strived to continue to work with the people involved and was successful in reinstating the contact, thus again demonstrating the emphasis and consideration channelled in this area of work. However, while the outcome of the work was positive, there was no evidence of an action plan, following managerial review, to outline the learning lessons from the outcomes, although this was done informally.

There is renewed and strong emphasis on life story work, based on the involvement of birth parents and consultation with adopters. There is recognition of its importance and enthusiasm from workers both from the adoption and looked after children teams. This is realistically supported by training, templates, direct help from the adoption team or panel advisor; thus is supported in a way that makes the work achievable and promotes quality and consistency. The initiatives are recent, with much work still in draft form and therefore outcomes cannot be measured yet; but there is no evidence of thinking about how it will be evaluated to measure impact.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The calibre of management is demonstrated by the development of the service since the last inspection, but particularly so in the last 12 to 24 months. Management has driven significant improvements to benefit users and has managed these changes very well, ensuring that staff felt well supported throughout. Managers are described to be open to informal casework discussions, excellent at formal supervision, enabling staff to use their professionalism and skills creatively, but in an environment that guides them well and with good scrutiny that practice is safe.

Elected members are strongly committed to corporate parenting; they are well informed on adoption matters and describe the relationships between key individuals as professional, open and trusting; thus enabling confidence in the quality of the service and that concerns would be shared and addressed promptly.

The agency has skilled and experienced social work staff. Staff like working for Camden and they feel well supported. Social workers from both the adoption and children looked after teams convey strong motivation and enthusiasm for their work. They describe Camden's training as very good and said that managers put forward training for all in addition to individual staff nominating themselves.

The agency provides clear information about its services so that all those touched by adoption can be clear of what to expect, but the children's guide does not contain all that is required by legislation.

Case and administrative records are generally well kept with due regard for confidentiality. However, at times they lack clear documentation of some steps in the process of assessments or case reviews. For example, evidence that applicants have been advised of their rights to make representations; or that all vulnerabilities have been considered when assessing suitability of adopters; or, after a complaint and placement breakdown, formal documentation to evidence the review of the case from start to finish and identification of learning and practice issues.

File archiving is appropriately managed and stored. There is a business continuity plan that shows appropriate prioritisation around safeguarding and statutory duties, to ensure that essential services can be maintained. The plan does not include a contingency for protecting and securing paper adoption records, but this is being addressed.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Camden has a commitment to equality which permeates all areas of adoption work, including the service provided to adopters, birth families, looked after children and the recruitment of staff. Thus every aspect of the agency's service is informed by a highly effective promotion of equality and a successful strategy to tackle discrimination, particularly noted in the thought and priority channelled to address disadvantage faced by children placed for adoption.

Above all this is a particularly inclusive service, free of stereotype or fear and delivered with much confidence and knowledge. The vulnerabilities of those touched by adoption are acknowledged sensitively and service users are welcomed without prejudice; thus they feel confident about the service provision. This results in effective enabling of users to properly participate in consultation and in working collaboratively. Management is aware of the areas that remain a challenge and is actively pursuing these.

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 applications from prospective adopters are received before they undertake preparation training (NMS 4)
- review the terminology used on documentation to clearly demonstrate that the agency is making a decision (NMS 13)
- review safeguarding procedures to ensure clarity of expectations and that, when required, referrals to other agencies are the responsibility of staff senior enough, in relation to the complexity of referrals, to secure good enough outcomes for children (NMS 32)
- develop management strategies in relation to engaging harder to reach birth parents (NMS 9)
- ensure that the children's guides to adoption contain all the information required by legislation (NMS 1)
- ensure that case and administrative records contain clear documentation of all significant considerations in the process of assessments or case reviews and, when appropriate, evidence learning lessons and outcomes. (NMS 25 and NMS 27)