



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

ADOPTION SERVICE

London Borough of Sutton

**The Lodge
Honeywood Walk
Carshalton
Surrey
SM5 3NX**

Lead Inspector
Marian Denny

Announced Inspection
9th January 2007 09:30

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

- Put the people who use social care first
- Improve services and stamp out bad practice
- Be an expert voice on social care
- Practise what we preach in our own organisation

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This is a report of an inspection to assess whether services are meeting the needs of people who use them. The legal basis for conducting inspections is the Care Standards Act 2000 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for this establishment are those for *Adoption*. They can be found at www.dh.gov.uk or obtained from The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

Every Child Matters, outlined the government's vision for children's services and formed the basis of the Children Act 2004. It provides a framework for inspection so that children's services should be judged on their contribution to the outcomes considered essential to wellbeing in childhood and later life. Those outcomes are:

- Being healthy
- Staying safe
- Enjoying and achieving
- Making a contribution; and
- Achieving economic wellbeing.

In response, the Commission for Social Care Inspection has re-ordered the national minimum standards for children's services under the five outcomes, for reporting purposes. A further section has been created under 'Management' to cover those issues that will potentially impact on all the outcomes above.

Copies of *Every Child Matters* and *The Children Act 2004* are available from The Stationery Office as above.

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SERVICE INFORMATION

Name of service	London Borough of Sutton
Address	The Lodge Honeywood Walk Carshalton Surrey SM5 3NX
Telephone number	020 8770 4507
Fax number	020 8770 5214
Email address	
Provider Web address	
Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)	London Borough of Sutton
Name of Nominated manager (if applicable)	Ian Lewis
Type of registration	Local Auth Adoption Service

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration: Not Applicable

Date of last inspection The National Commission for Social Care
Inspection carried out the last inspection on 17th
November 2003.

Brief Description of the Service:

The London Borough of Sutton operated its own adoption service, which was located within the authority's children and family's services and was part of the Children, Young People and Learning Services. At the time of the inspection, the service manager of the fostering and adoption teams had the overall responsibility for the strategic management of the adoption service, whilst the adoption team manager undertook the everyday management of the service and also acted as the adoption panel adviser. Both managers were based in the Lodge in Carshalton, which also provided office accommodation for the fostering, assessment and care planning teams of the children and families service. The premises themselves were situated in the centre of Carshalton and easily accessible by car and public transport.

The main purpose of the Council's adoption service was to make arrangements for the adoption of children. This was achieved through the recruitment, preparation, training, assessment and approval of adopters for both domestic and inter-country adoptions. The matching and placement of children to adoptive parents or families, support for children and adopters post placement, post adoption contact, support and counselling for adults who had been adopted. In addition, a letterbox scheme, which supported the information exchange in adoption placements was provided and maintained. The agency also offered an adoption service to stepparents and relatives wishing to adopt. A counselling service to adults, who were seeking information about their birth family, was provided. Independent support services were provided to birth parents through spot purchasing from a voluntary agency.

SUMMARY

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

The London Borough of Sutton's senior management team demonstrated a commitment to this inspection and had prepared for it in an excellent manner. All the pre-inspection documentation provided was thorough and arrived within the agreed timescales. Arrangements made for the inspection were thoughtful and enabled inspectors to make effective use of their time. The facilities and resources provided were of a good standard and everyone involved in the inspection were most helpful and courteous.

Prior to the inspection, the pre-inspection material and the questionnaires, which had been returned to the inspection team were read and analysed. The information obtained from these documents has been incorporated into the inspection findings.

The inspection, itself, was carried out over four days and involved two inspectors. In addition, one inspector observed an adoption panel for half a day. Interviews were undertaken with the executive head of children and families, who was also the agency's decision maker, the service manager for the fostering and adoption team, the team and assistant team manager for the adoption and permanence team, an assistant team manager from the Looked after team, the recruitment officer, an independent reviewing officer, adoption and childcare social workers, the adoption support worker, as well as an administrative member of staff. An elected member, who had lead responsibility for children's services, the adoption panel's medical adviser, the chairperson, as well as several specialist advisers, which included two clinical psychologists, an educational psychologist and the looked after children's nurse were also interviewed. A selection of children and adopters' files were read and four adoptive families interviewed. A variety of agency records were inspected, administrative sources examined and the office premises seen. Security issues relating to both record keeping and the premises were also considered.

In addition, the inspection team received four questionnaires from prospective and approved adopters, none from birth family members, five from placing social workers and three from specialist advisors. The responses received from these questionnaires, together with the information obtained from interviews with adopters have been reflected in the main body of this report.

What the service does well:

The Council demonstrated an understanding and commitment to the corporate parenting role. The executive head of children's services was well respected by staff, whom they saw as having the necessary leadership skills and vision to take their services forward.

Similarly, staff had a high regard for the senior manager of the fostering and adoption section, who was described as being a "very personable", "accessible" and "an extremely competent" and "good manager". The experience and skills of the adoption service's management team ensured that the agency was organised and managed in an effective and efficient manner.

The adoption service's recruitment activities successfully targeted adopters, who were able to meet the needs of children requiring adoption. The agency also had an effective system in place to manage and prioritise enquiries from prospective adopters, who were most likely to meet the needs of children waiting for adoptive parents.

There was a clear well structured preparation programme, which adopters stated had been well organised, presented and extremely helpful in their "journey" through adoption.

Adopters were also positive about their assessment, indicating that it had been "professional", "thorough" and "undertaken in a "timely," and "sensitive manner". Adopters were generally very satisfied with the service they had received from the agency and several adopters stated "I would recommend them to anyone who wants to adopt a child".

The adoption service had undertaken considerable work with other childcare staff regarding permanency planning and this had resulted in children being referred to the adoption service at an early stage in the care planning process.

A tracking system to monitor the progress of prospective adopters' applications and all children with an adoption plan had been developed. This information was regularly shared with all childcare managers. The children and families panel, which was chaired by the executive head of the children and families' service also served as a useful mechanism to ensure that plans for children in the looked after system were not allowed to drift.

The adoption service had good, clear family finding procedures, which also served as a working tool to guide departmental staff through the process. The agency was pro-active and effective in its family finding, placing children with families in a timely way.

The agency was extremely child focussed and gave careful consideration to matching a child with adopters to ensure that good practice and outcomes were achieved.

Life story work was seen as important in preparing a child for placement and maintaining placement stability. It was also clearly recognised as an on-going process and the life storybook was very much seen as a living document, with adopters continuing to develop this through the passage of time.

The adoption panel was properly constituted and demonstrated a good knowledge and understanding of the complexity of adoption work. The panel was well chaired and decision-making was thorough.

The agency had a number of specialist advisers, which included the panel advisers, as well as a clinical nurse specialist, an educational psychologist and two clinical psychologists who undertook work with Sutton's looked after children. These specialist advisers were extremely knowledgeable; child focussed and provided a good service to the adoption agency.

Sutton had introduced family group conferencing in their children's services, which clearly demonstrated the value and importance the authority ascribed to birth parents and families in the resolution of their difficulties. These conferences provided families with a real opportunity to actively engage and involve themselves in the care planning process for their child, at an early age.

The agency had a letterbox scheme, which was a well organised and an effectively managed system.

The staff working in the permanence team had a wealth of knowledge, experience and skills in both the field of childcare and adoption. Staff used this knowledge and skills to achieve a good standard of practice to the benefit of adopters and their children.

The quality of the administrative support provided to the adoption service was of a good standard. Adopters stated that the administrator was "friendly and helpful" and was clearly a real asset to the agency.

The council was considered to be a fair and competent employer. Sutton recognised the importance of on-going professional development of its staff and both in-house and external specialist training was provided. Over 85% of childcare staff had received training on the Children and Adoption Act 2002.

There was a good standard of case recording in both adopters and children's files.

The adoption service was an integral part of the children services and there was good communication between childcare and adoption staff. The effective communication between them facilitated a child-focused approach to adoption issues.

What has improved since the last inspection?

Since the last inspection, the adoption service's management team had been strengthened with the appointment of a Senior Practitioner, who assisted the adoption team manager in some of the managerial tasks.

The agency had been successful in recruiting and appointing an adoption support worker. Sutton was providing some additional support services to adopters directly, as well as through collaborative work with other agencies in the Consortium.

Another clinical psychologist had been appointed to the multi-disciplinary looked after children's team, which was based in the fostering and adoption section. This enabled the clinical psychological services provided to social work staff, looked after children and adoptive families to be expanded and developed.

Since the last inspection, the agency had revised its policies, procedures and various other documentation in accordance with the Children and Adoption Act 2002. Additional literature was also being provided adopters.

The agency had produced children's guides, which were available in a variety of formats, to meet the differing needs of children and contained all the necessary information as prescribed by regulation.

Birth Parents were able to access independent counselling and support from an outside voluntary adoption agency.

A Record of supervision decisions made in respect of adopters was now held on their file.

Panel Members' personnel files had been established.

What they could do better:

Adopters found the agency's preparation training "extremely valuable". However, its effectiveness could be further enhanced if the agency in collaboration with another or other agencies provided a preparation groups for second time adopters.

Adopters' assessments were generally of a good standard, though they could be further improved with a more robust quality assurance system. Practice could also be enhanced if the current pet and health/safety checklists used were developed.

The quality of the child's permanence reports was variable, further work needs to be undertaken in order to address this.

The agency should give some consideration to whether the service manager of the agency should undertake the role of vice chair to the adoption panel as this may at times give rise to a potential conflict of interests.

Panel members' files were not kept in accordance with the adoption regulations and this must be immediately addressed.

The panel minutes could be improved upon if the names of panel members present were recorded and there was a more detailed record of panel members' discussions.

The adoption service should ensure that the agency decision letter is sent out within the agency's prescribed timescales.

The agency must ensure all staff personnel files are kept in accordance with the adoption regulations.

The current staffing hours allocated to adoption support impairs the development of the service and may compromise the quality of support adopters currently receive. In view of this the agency should review the resources currently allocated to the adoption support service.

The independent counselling and support service commissioned by the Authority should be proactively promoted.

The intermediary service provided to birth parents and families is limited. The agency should consider whether this could be developed by the adoption service or whether consideration needs to be given to commissioning such a service from an adoption support agency.

The agency's statement of purpose should be revised if it is to meet the adoption national minimum standards and the adoption regulations.

Whilst the quality of case recording in the adoption service was good, there were some minor shortfalls, which should be addressed.

Sutton had a disaster recovery plan, however, the agency should develop a disaster recovery plan, which is specific to the adoption service.

Please contact the provider for advice of actions taken in response to this inspection.

The report of this inspection is available from enquiries@csci.gsi.gov.uk or by contacting your local CSCI office. The summary of this inspection report can be made available in other formats on request.

DETAILS OF INSPECTOR FINDINGS

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Staying Safe

Enjoying and Achieving

Making a Positive Contribution

Achieving Economic Wellbeing - There are no NMS that map to this outcome

Management

Scoring of Outcomes

Statutory Requirements identified during the inspection

Staying Safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- The agency matches children with adopters (NMS 2)
- The agency assesses and prepares adopters (NMS 4)
- Adoptors are given information about matching (NMS 5)
- The functions of the adoption panel are as specified (NMS 10)
- The constitution and membership of adoption panels are as specified (NMS 11)
- Adoption panels are timely (NMS 12)
- Adoption agency decision is made without delay and appropriately (NMS 13)
- The manager is suitable to carry on or manage an adoption agency (NMS 15)
- Staff are suitable to work with children (NMS 19)
- The agency has a robust complaints procedure (NMS 24 Voluntary Adoption Agency only)
- The agency safeguards and promotes the welfare of its service users (NMS 32)

The Commission considers Standards 2, 4, 5, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 19, 24 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following standard(s):

Quality in this outcome area is good as the majority of children with a plan for adoption benefit from a service, which is child focused and which safeguards and promotes their welfare throughout the process.

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

EVIDENCE:

The London Borough of Sutton was aware of the children locally requiring adoptive families and this was clearly reflected in their marketing strategy, which underpinned their recruitment plan for adopters. The agency's recruitment and advertising activities were carefully monitored and analysed, so ensuring recruitment activities were effectively targeting adopters who would meet the needs of local children requiring adoption. However, the relatively small ethnic minority population in the borough, together with their

geographical location, had limited the agency's ability to recruit sufficient adopters from the black and minority ethnic communities. In situations where such a placement was required the agency used their local consortium or other adoption agencies to find a suitable family for the child/children. Evidence obtained in this inspection confirmed that the agency produced good publicity materials and there was an effective system in place to manage enquiries from prospective adopters. Several adopters commented favourably on Sutton's advertising literature and reported that their initial response from the agency was "open," "welcoming," "sensitively handled," "prompt" and "efficient."

The agency had developed a tracking system to monitor the progress of prospective adopters' applications and all children with an adoption plan. This information was shared on a regular basis with all childcare managers. The Children and Families Panel, which is chaired by the Executive Head of the Children and Families' service, also served as a useful mechanism to ensure that plans for children in the looked after system were not allowed to drift.

The adoption and childcare social workers had a great deal of professional mutual respect for each other and there was good communication and relationships between them. Collaborative work had also resulted in the borough's childcare workers having an increased understanding about permanency planning and adoption. Consequently, children were referred to the adoption and permanence team at the early stages of the care planning process and workers were invited to the four monthly looked after child/children's (LAC) review.

There was a clear family finding procedure, which was designed to be a working tool to guide departmental staff through the process. The agency was extremely proactive in family finding and had a mutual agreement with a neighbouring Local Authority to undertake this activity. The service also had a positive relationship with their local adoption consortium and there was evidence of the consortium, as well as other national facilities, such as "Be My Parent", "Children Who Wait" and the "National Adoption Register" being used to meet the needs of children, who had an adoption plan.

The adoption service was extremely child focussed and there was clear, recorded evidence of children's wishes and feelings being taken into account in the care planning and matching process. The adoption service made every effort to ensure children were matched with adopters, who could best meet their needs. There was evidence that in situations, which were not an ideal match, the agency provided the adoptive family with the necessary support and ensured that any gaps in relation to the children's background and needs were met. Decisions to place siblings together or to separate them were taken very seriously, and usually involved a psychological assessment to support any professional decision-making. The quality of the agency's matching process and practice can perhaps be best illustrated by the fact that their last disruption in an adoption placement was over five years ago.

A formal preparation, assessment and approval process was carried out in respect of adopters and there was a clear commitment to ensuring foster carers, who adopt a child they have previously fostered, received the same services as other prospective adopters.

Preparation for domestic adopters was provided through the local adoption consortium, with the programme adapted to meet the needs of foster carers wishing to adopt. The course was regularly reviewed and changes implemented where necessary. Inter country adopters were offered preparation training provided by the Overseas Adoption Service.

The majority of adopters reported that the preparation, training programme had been provided "fairly quickly," though two adopters stated there had been some delay before they could obtain a place on the programme. However, all adopters stated that the programme had been "well organised" and "presented". Adopters were generally of the view that the preparation groups were held at an appropriate venue and convenient times. However, one adoptive couple, who were in full-time employment indicated that attendance at the groups had been difficult and stated they would have welcomed these groups being held at weekends. Several adopters stated that the introduction to the groups had been "warm," "friendly," and "inclusive," the programme "informative", "stimulating" and "enjoyable." A number of adopters stated that the programme had provided them with the opportunity to explore a variety of adoption issues, which had proved to be an "invaluable" experience. Several adopters commented on how useful it had been to hear about the experiences of adopters and birth parents whilst on the course. One adoptive family, who were adopting another child, stated that they would have liked to attend a preparation group specifically for second-time adopters. The agency may wish to consider, whether in collaboration with other consortium members, second time adopters' preparation groups can be introduced to the service.

Several placing social workers/authorities stated that "good preparatory work" had been undertaken with the agency's adopters.

Adopters spoken with, together with information obtained from the returned questionnaires, indicated that the assessment process itself had commenced in a timely manner. They stated that the assessment process itself had been "clear," "well structured," and undertaken at an "appropriate pace". Adopters stated that their assessment had been "thorough" and that staff had handled the personal issues that had arisen in a "sensitive" and "thoughtful" manner. A number of adopters commented on the "knowledge" and "professionalism" of their worker. Adopters indicated that through out the adoption process, they had been kept fully informed of their progress. A number of adopters commented on the accuracy of their written assessment (form F), which they indicated portrayed them "very accurately". Several adopters stated that they

had received a copy of their form F and had been aware that they had to send any observations regarding their assessment, in writing to the agency, within a specified period.

Placing social workers presented a similar picture regarding the quality of adopters' assessments, with several stating that the assessments were "thorough" and provided an "accurate" picture of the adopters.

The adoption service undertakes competency-based assessments of adopters, which it aims to complete within six months. A sample of adopters' files were examined. The assessments seen had been completed within the prescribed timescale and were generally of good quality, in so far as they were detailed, insightful, demonstrated a great deal of sound professional analysis and clearly outlined the applicants' competencies and abilities to parent a child. However, in one file, the adoptive family's child attended school, despite this fact no educational reference had been sought, such a reference though may well have informed the agency about the couple's parenting capacity and enhanced the agency's assessment. In another file, there was no evidence that the Local Authority check had been completed. This was discussed with the Service and Team Manager at the time of the inspection, who both explained that such a check, was standard procedure for the agency. It was agreed that this matter would be investigated. Since the inspection, the Service Manager has confirmed the system used to carry out Local Authority checks has now been revised to ensure such an omission does not reoccur.

There was evidence that the agency considered the adopters' capacity to look after children in a safe and responsible manner with health/safety checks and dog questionnaires consistently used and found on file. The agency may wish to consider developing these documents though, in order to enhance this aspect of the work.

In view of the two shortfalls found in the adopters' files, it is recommended that managerial scrutiny should be increased and the quality assurance systems used by the agency made more robust.

The agency had written information about the matching, introduction and placement process. There was also written information regarding the role of the adoption register. Adopters indicated that this written information had been most helpful and enabled them to gain a good understanding of all the stages in the adoption process.

The agency's practice as stated earlier was child focussed, with careful consideration being given to matching a child with adopters, as evidenced in the agency's thorough matching meetings and the very good quality of the matching reports.

There was evidence that the agency made every effort to ensure adopters received all the necessary information regarding their child, for example, adopters were able to meet with the child's foster carer, the child's social worker and where necessary to meet with the panel's medical adviser to obtain detailed medical information regarding their child's medical condition and to discuss the full implications of this in caring for the child.

The agency had also made real efforts to ensure child's permanence reports (C.P.R.) were of a good standard with the provision of training and mentorship to childcare staff. The reports seen though were of a variable quality. The service acknowledged this and indicated that this was an area for development. However, the service must ensure that a strategy is developed and implemented to improve practice on the quality of C.P.R.'s.

Most adopters reported that the agency had provided them with a great deal of information about their child/children. However, one adopter stated that they would have liked more information, at an earlier stage, in relation to the likelihood of a medical condition developing in their child.

In the sample of children's files and panel documentation seen, there was clear evidence to confirm that the child/children's wishes and feelings regarding adoption had been taken into account. There was also evidence to confirm that direct work was being undertaken with the child/children to prepare and enable them to move into their adoptive placement.

There was evidence that the agency had developed an effective system to record the adoptive parents' decision regarding notifying the agency, if an adopted child dies during childhood or soon afterwards.

The agency ensured adopters provide information about themselves in a way that was appropriate to the child's age and understanding. This information was presented in a variety of formats, such as a book, video and DVD and was often used as an effective tool in preparing a child, prior to placement.

The agency had a written adoption and permanence panel policy and procedures, which had recently been revised in accordance with the Adoption and Children Act 2002. This documentation was available to all staff and panel members and contained all the necessary information required by the Adoption National Minimum Standards and regulations.

Prospective adopters were invited to attend panel and information about this process was provided. The service was also in the process of producing a panel leaflet for adopters, which would include panel members' photographs. The inspectors were pleased to learn of this development and would endorse this action.

Several Adopters' commented positively on their experiences of attending the panel stating that although they were initially "extremely nervous", they had found panel members were "welcoming" and made "a real effort to put them at their ease". They also stated that the meeting was "well-chaired" and indicated that the questions they were asked had been "appropriate". A couple of adopters though stated that they felt they had been asked "too many questions" and had found the whole experience "difficult." At the time of the inspection, the agency arranged for the social worker and prospective adopter/adopters to attend panel together, so ensuring there was transparency to the panel process. However, whilst such an intention was commendable, this practice inevitably meant adopters had to sit through a number of panel members' questions and attend panel for a longer period of time, than if the panel had seen the social worker separately. Since a number of adopters view attendance at panel as a daunting experience, the agency may wish to consider, whether transparency in the panel process can be best achieved for adopters through the agency's current practice.

The constitution and membership of the adoption panel was in accordance with the adoption regulations. However, the agency may wish to consider the appropriateness of the adoption Service Manager also undertaking the role of the adoption panel vice chair, given that in certain circumstances this may give rise to a potential conflict of interests.

There was evidence to confirm that new panel members were provided with an opportunity to observe the adoption panel before commencing in their roles. The agency also provided an informal induction to new panel members and consideration was being given to developing a more formalised induction programme. Panel members had been provided with regular and appropriate training for their roles, for example, the Adoption and Children Act 2002. There were also plans to provide further training on intercountry adoption.

A sample of panel members' files were seen and all contained the information identified in the National Minimum Standards (11.3). There were other shortfalls in the files though and these have been discussed in the "Management Section" of this report.

Panels were convened on a regular basis to avoid unnecessary delay in the approval of adopters or the matching of a child. Panel members received information on adopters and children in advance of the panel date so ensuring panel members had the necessary time to read the documentation.

A sample of panel minutes were seen, these could be enhanced if there was more detailed recording of the panel's discussion, however they clearly indicated the reasons for the panel's conclusions and recommendations. A recommendation regarding the panel minutes has also been made in relation to case records and can be found in the "Management" section of this report.

The agency decision-maker took her responsibilities very seriously, with all panel papers and minutes received and carefully examined, prior to the agency's decision being made. Evidence obtained in this inspection confirmed that the agency-decision maker had no hesitation in overturning the adoption panel's recommendation should she feel this was the correct course of action.

There was evidence that the agency's decision was usually made without delay and there were systems in place to ensure this decision was effectively conveyed to all relevant parties. In one of the files examined though the agency decision maker's letter had not been sent out within the agency's prescribed timescales. The agency needs to take care to ensure this practice does not reoccur.

There were clearly written recruitment and selection procedures. A sample of personnel files were examined, which included the manager of the adoption service. The information obtained confirmed that the manager was suitable to run the adoption service and with the exception of one personnel file, all contained all the information required by regulation (please see standard 28, for further details).

All staff working within the adoption service were suitably qualified and had considerable childcare and adoption experience. The inspectors were advised that any student on placement in the service would not have any case responsibility and would always be carefully supervised by qualified staff with the requisite years of experience.

The London Borough of Sutton had a Children and Family Procedure Manual, which was comprehensive, detailed and covered all the procedures in relation to services provided to children and families. In chapter eight of this document, the procedures relating to the permanent placement of children in a variety of settings, including adoption were detailed. Child protection procedures in relation to an adopted child and adopters were also dealt with and the agency should be commended for having such procedures in place.

Enjoying and Achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- The adoption agency provides support for adoptive parents (NMS 6)
- The agency has access to specialist advisers as appropriate (NMS 18)
- Services are tailored to meet the needs of people affected by adoption (NMS 33)

The Commission considers Standards 6 and 33 the key standards to be inspected.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following standard(s):

Quality in this outcome area is good. The agency provided a variety of support and specialist advice for adoptive families with a view to maintaining placement stability for children. However, capacity issues within the adoption service were in danger of compromising the quality of this support. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

EVIDENCE:

The London Borough of Sutton was a small, geographically compact borough, with a reasonably small number of “looked after” children in comparison with boroughs of a similar size. Consequently, its adoption agency was also relatively small in size and this clearly impacted on its capacity to provide a comprehensive package of support services. The agency addressed this by providing support services through a variety of means, for example, through direct provision from the London Borough of Sutton, the local adoption consortium and approved adoption support agencies. In addition, the adoption service offered advice and assistance in accessing appropriate mainstream services and ensuring that these services met the particular needs of those affected by adoption.

Adopters were given written information about the adoption support services available through Sutton and in their area, if they lived outside Sutton. At the time of the inspection, the agency provided a number of support services for adopters living in the London Borough of Sutton, including those who had adopted from overseas, adopted children who lived in Sutton, as well as children of adopters. The agency also undertook assessments for support in

relation to adoptive families and their children, who had adopted over three years ago and were residing in the authority.

Adoption workers supported adopters prior to the making of an adoption order and a further year, after the adoption order was made. In addition, the agency had an adoption support worker, who provided some support services, however, this post was not full-time and there was concern that the worker was carrying out too many diverse tasks. The time allocated to the work also made it difficult to effect further developments in the service. The service manager advised the inspectors that he was considering converting some hours from the vacant adoption worker's post to adoption support. The inspectors were of the view that if adoption support services were to be of a qualitative nature and indeed develop, then the service manager's proposed course of action was necessary and they would endorse this action.

The adoption services provided by Sutton included financial support packages for adopters, a monthly adoption support group was provided adopters, there was an annual social event and there were plans to develop a newsletter for adopters. The agency also accessed services from other agencies, in situations where such support was required, for example, education, health and advice to an adoptive family regarding the entitlement of benefits. Thus, evidence was obtained during this inspection of the agency utilising the services of the two clinical psychologists, who worked with Sutton's looked after children providing adoption support. The support provided was in the form of advice, assessment and direct work with adopters and children. Similarly, the Clinical Nurse Specialist for looked after children, was also used to offer support to adopters and children regarding any health issues. Adoptive families and children also had access to the local children and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). In situations, where there were difficulties in placement, the inspectors were advised that the agency was extremely committed to maintaining the placement and would utilise all available resources to ensure the necessary support was provided. The fact that the agency has had no disruptions in adoptive placements for the past five years illustrates that not only is the agency extremely good at preparing and assessing adopters, as well as matching but also provides adopters with a good level of support to maintain stability in the adoptive placement.

The adoption service also provided a variety of training for adopters, for example, they had arranged for adopters to access the six module training course "a piece of cake" from Adoption U.K, which was a course delivered by adopters for adopters. In collaboration with the local adoption consortium, the agency had arranged for adoption support workshops to be held six times a year for adopters and a children's group was held three times a year. Arrangements were also in place for members of the consortium to access each other's services; for example, one neighbouring Local Authority ran a mother and toddlers group for adopters.

The agency had sought feedback from adopters regarding these services and the inspectors were informed that overall adopters were impressed with the support they received.

Adopter spoken with, together with the information obtained in the returned questionnaires indicated that Adopters were generally complimentary about the support they had received. Several adopters stated that the support provided by their adoption worker had been "good", "very helpful" and overall were of the view that they were "satisfied" with the support they had received.

Information obtained from placing authorities/social workers' returned questionnaires, as well as those spoken with, indicated that adopters received a good level of support from the service. Several also commented extremely positively about the collaborative and multi-disciplinary approach Sutton employed in providing a complex and effective package of support to adopters.

There was evidence that the agency's preparation training, assessment and matching process provided adopters with information about a child's history and its relevance in enabling a child to develop a positive self-image. It also enabled adopters to understand the need and to develop strategies in assisting a child to address all forms of discrimination. The importance of keeping safe information provided by birth parents and families was clearly addressed through out the preparation and assessment process.

The agency had access to a variety of specialist advisors and services to meet its needs. These included the panel medical and legal advisor, two clinical psychologists, the educational psychologist, and the clinical nurse specialist for Sutton's looked after children as well as the overseas adoption helpline. Staff confirmed that the panel advisers were available for consultation, if required and they were described as being "extremely knowledgeable" and were said to provide an "extremely good service" to the agency. The other specialist advisors were also considered to provide an excellent service to the adoption service and all the advisers were said to be very committed to their work and extremely "child focussed".

The agency had written protocols governing the role of specialist advisers

Making a Positive Contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- Birth parents and birth families are involved in adoption plans (NMS 7)
- Birth parents and birth families are involved in maintaining the child's heritage (NMS 8)
- The Adoption agency supports birth parents and families (NMS 9)
- Service users receive good quality services based on their needs (NMS 34)

The Commission considers Standards 7, 8, 9 and 34 the key standards to be inspected.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following standard(s):

Quality in this outcome area is adequate. The adoption agency had a commitment to developing and improving support to birth parents and their families. However, the agency needs to develop a coherent strategy for working with birth parents and families, if the outcomes of these standards are to be fully achieved.

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

EVIDENCE:

There was evidence that the service recognised the life – long implications of adoption. Placing social workers were encouraged to involve birth parents and families in the care planning processes for their child. In several files, there was evidence of the birth parents' views about adoption being clearly recorded, though this was not evident in every file examined.

In addition, the agency spot purchases from a voluntary adoption agency an independent counselling service to birth parents. A maximum of six sessions were provided birth parents, however there were arrangements in place to secure additional funding, should more sessions be required. Information obtained in this inspection indicated that take up of this service was not high. The agency may wish to consider taking a more pro-active stance in the promotion of this service, to ensure maximum up-take.

Since the last inspection, the agency had entered into reciprocal arrangements with members of the South West London Consortium to provide support to birth parents. Thus, Kingston-upon-Thames had established a birth mothers' group, which Sutton mothers could attend. Sutton, together with the borough of Merton, were also considering developing a birth parents' support group.

Birth parents were encouraged to contribute to information included in the Child's permanence report (C.P.R.). In several of the files and panel papers examined evidence of this practice was seen, though it was not evidenced in all the C.P.R.'s. At the time of the inspection, as stated earlier in the report, the agency was working very hard to address this and improve the quality of these reports.

Birth parents and their families' were encouraged to provide information and photographs about their child to contribute to the child's heritage. The inspectors were advised that the quality of life story work and books for children with a permanence or adoption plan was variable, ranging from excellent to adequate. In the case files seen there was evidence that life story work was being completed with children with an adoption plan. It was also extremely pleasing to see that the agency recognised that life story work was an on-going process and the life storybook a living document. There was evidence of adopters being helped to recognise this and continuing with this work post placement.

Several adopters stated that they were impressed with the quality of work undertaken in preparing their child for adoption and the information provided them. A couple of adopters commented positively about their child's life storybook, which they believed had been "completed extremely well".

Birth parents and families were given further opportunities to maintain and update their child's heritage through direct or indirect contact via the agency's letterbox system. Inspection of the letterbox scheme confirmed it was a well organised and an effectively managed system, which provided birth parents and their families a real opportunity to contribute to the maintenance of their child's heritage.

No questionnaires were received from birth parents or birth family members. Arrangements had been made to interview a birth mother and father but these interviews were not effected.

Management

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- There is a clear written statement of the aims and objectives of the adoption agency and the adoption agency ensures that it meets those aims and objectives (NMS 1)
- The agency provides clear written information for prospective adopters (NMS 3)
- The manager has skills to carry on or manage the adoption agency (NMS 14)
- The adoption agency is managed effectively and efficiently (NMS 16)
- The agency is monitored and controlled as specified (NMS 17)
- The staff are organised and managed effectively (NMS 20)
- The agency has sufficient staff with the right skills / experience (NMS 21)
- The agency is a fair and competent employer (NMS 22)
- The agency provides training for staff (NMS 23)
- Case records for children and prospective / approved adopters are comprehensive and accurate (NMS 25)
- The agency provides access to records as appropriate (NMS 26)
- The agency's administrative records processes are appropriate (NMS 27)
- The agency maintains personnel files for members of staff and members of adoption panels (NMS 28)
- The premises used by the adoption agency are suitable for purpose (NMS 29)
- The adoption agency is financially viable (NMS 30, Voluntary Adoption Agency only)
- The adoption agency has robust financial processes (NMS 31)

The Commission considers Standards 1, 3, 16, 21, 25 and 27 the key standards to be inspected.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following standard(s):

Quality in this outcome area is good. The adoption agency was well managed and a good service was provided to children and adopters, however a more robust quality assurance system would enhance the service.

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

EVIDENCE:

The agency had a statement of purpose, which had been revised and approved by Local Authority members. This document contained most of the information required under the adoption regulations, however further information was necessary, specifically in relation to numbers 2,3,4,and 6 of Schedule I of Adoption Services Regulations 2003, if the agency was to fully meet this standard. Several placing authorities/social workers indicated that they had not seen the adoption service's statement of purpose, the agency should consider circulating this document to its partner agencies.

At the time of the inspection, the agency's written policies and procedures had been revised in line with the Adoption Agency Regulations. Those seen accurately reflected the agency's statement of purpose.

The agency had produced two children's guides to meet the needs of different age groups of children. These guides were extremely colourful and attractively presented. They were well thought out and in an age appropriate, child friendly form. They were available in a variety of different formats to meet the differing needs of children and contained all the necessary information prescribed in the Adoption National Minimum Standards and regulations.

The agency provided an information pack to all those who made enquiries about adoption. This attractively presented pack contained clear, well-written information about the adoption process. There was evidence those interested in becoming adoptive parents being welcomed without prejudice and treated in a fair, open and respectful manner. These principles permeated the whole of the adoption process, were clearly reflected in the agency's practice and favourably commented upon by a number of adopters. Information was provided about the agency's eligibility criteria and the needs of local children, who required families.

A number of adopters spoke positively about the written information received stating that it was "clear" and of "good quality". The inspectors were able to evidence that the agency ensured that all foster carers, who applied to adopt, received the same information as other adopters.

The agency had effective systems in place to prioritise those adopters who were most likely meet the needs of children waiting for adoptive parents.

Both the team and assistant manager of the adoption and permanence team had extensive knowledge of child-care and considerable knowledge, experience and skills in adoption. Staff interviewed spoke extremely highly of them and clearly held them in high esteem. The manager was said to have an "open", "helpful" and "supportive" management style. Both the team and assistant

manager were said to be extremely child focussed, enthusiastic about the work and took a genuine interest in any issues discussed with them.

There was evidence to confirm that the agency operated in accordance with its statement of purpose and was managed efficiently and effectively. There were written job descriptions available for the manager of the agency and well-defined managerial arrangements in place to identify, who was in charge when the manager was absent. There were clear roles for managers and staff, with well-established lines of communication and accountability. A supervisory and appraisal system was in place, which was used to monitor staff's performance and ensure a quality of service. There was evidence that staff were being supervised and appraised in accordance with the agency's policies.

The agency ensured managers and staff were aware of their responsibility to declare any possible conflict of interests, which was clearly outlined in the London Borough of Sutton's code of conduct.

There were a number of systems in place to monitor and control the activities of the adoption service. These procedures included an adoption tracking system, which monitored the outcomes for children, as well as adopters and was regularly considered by the Senior Management team. The agency's supervision and appraisal systems monitored the adoption workers' performance. A file auditing system to monitor the agency's case records and ensure they met the required standard had also been developed. Independent reviewing officers, who chaired LAC reviews, carried out a monitoring and quality assurance role in respect of the adoption service. The adoption team manager undertook a quality assurance role in the second opinion visits made to adopters. Prior to the panel, a briefing meeting took place between the panel adviser, chairperson and the social worker presenting the case. At this meeting any quality assurance issues relating to the case were addressed. The adoption panel also carried out a quality assurance role in relation to the cases presented to panel. The agency decision-maker also carried out a quality assurance role in respect of the agency. The adoption agency provided regular reports to Senior Management regarding the agency's performance. Regular reports were also made to elected members. In addition, an annual adoption report was presented to the Council Performance Committee. Interviews with members of the senior management team, as well as the elected member confirmed that councillors' increasingly took their corporate parenting role seriously and carefully scrutinised all information presented to them.

An examination of the agency's quality assurance systems indicated that there was a need for some of these systems to be more vigorous; as a consequence a requirement has been made regarding this.

The service was organised and managed in an efficient and effective manner. Staff working within the adoption team were a very experienced group of staff, with the necessary qualifications, experience and skills to undertake the agency's work effectively. Adopters made a number of very positive

comments regarding individual adoption workers' practice, for example, they were described as "knowledgeable ", "professional," " very committed to their work," "sensitive and skilled in their approach to the assessment," and "extremely supportive." Several adopters indicated their adoption worker had been " excellent ". Two adopters stated their worker was "always prepared to go the extra mile," another adoptive family stated that they "were "really pleased with the service they had received from Sutton". Several adopters stated that they had recommended the service to their friends and colleagues.

The childcare social workers interviewed showed a real commitment to providing a good, qualitative service to the children and their families. They stated that they worked well with the adoption staff and that there was good communication between them. A number of childcare workers spoke positively about the knowledge and skills of the adoption workers; they clearly had a great deal of respect for them and found them "extremely helpful and supportive". A number of staff provided evidence of excellent family finding in relation to several children and sibling groups. Similar views were also expressed in the returned placing social workers/authorities questionnaires.

At the time of the inspection, the adoption team's administrative post was vacant, however, the inspectors were advised that an appointment to the post had been made and it was shortly to be filled. The fostering team's administrator was therefore providing administrative support to the adoption team. Despite a heavy workload, the administrator provided a very good service to the adoption team. There were also good administrative systems in place to assist staff to carry out their work in an effective and efficient manner. This was also reflected in the positive comments made by adopters, who described the administrator as "extremely friendly", "helpful" and "efficient".

Since the last inspection, the authority had experienced some staff shortages in the front line childcare teams; these vacancies had inevitably had some impact on the work undertaken by the adoption service. At the time of the inspection though the borough had addressed this staffing shortage through the appointment of a number of agency staff, which had resulted in the teams becoming fully complement.

The agency had staff, who were well qualified, experienced and skilled to meet the needs of the agency. However, there was only one adoption support worker in the team, who did not work on a full-time basis (30hours). The inspectors were concerned that this level of staffing was not always adequate to meet the agency's needs and made it difficult to effect further developments in the service. This matter was raised with the managers at the time of the inspection; the inspectors were advised that consideration was being given to converting some of the hours from the vacant adoption worker's post to adoption support. The inspectors endorse this action, given the very real likelihood of an increased demand being placed on the agency in respect of their adoption support services.

The managers and staff interviewed generally considered the council to be a fair and competent employer. Staff interviewed stated that they were able to access internal and external training and post qualification study, as part of their professional development. They considered the training provided was of good quality and effectively met their needs.

The service and team manager dealt with any complaints made against the agency, sensitively, efficiently and effectively. Withdrawals and de-registrations were also managed well.

The agency had written policies and procedures in place for case recording, as well as the maintenance and formatting of adoption case records. These policies and procedures related to electronic and manual case recording. At the time of the inspection, the agency was in the process of a transition from manual adoption records to electronic ones and as a consequence, both electronic and manual records were examined during this inspection.

The sample of manual and electronic records examined indicated that these policies and procedures were being followed, with the records seen being generally well organised and in good order. All the records seen were clearly written, detailed and of a good standard. There was evidence of management oversight through out the case recording, including a record of all case decisions made in staff supervision. However, there were some shortfalls in the adopters' files, for example, in one file the agency decision makers' letter was out of date, in another file, there appeared to have been a typological error, since the date the home study was recorded as commencing was prior to the case being allocated to the adoption worker. In one file, the summary of case notes had not been fully completed, for example, the worker's signature had been omitted, in other documentation, the analysis of managers' comments had not been completed, nor had the date for "the next session". In one file, no adoption support plan was found.

In the sample of children's adoption files, the case recording was found to be of a good standard. All files, apart from one file, which did not contain an adoption support plan, had all the necessary documentation required by the adoption agencies' regulations. It was noted though that the panel minutes on the files, did not contain details of the panel members, who were present at the meeting. Since an adult adoptee who accesses their file has a right to know who was involved in making such a significant decision in their lives, it is recommended that the panel minutes placed on file clearly detail those panel members, who were present at the adoption panel.

The agency had a good system in place to ensure confidentiality, which was in accordance with current legislation. Staff, panel members and specialist advisors were fully aware of this system and strictly adhered to it.

The Council had a written policy, procedure and guidelines in relation to access to records, which had been up-dated in accordance with the Adoption and

Children Act 2002 and specifically dealt with the legal responsibilities the agency had in relation to adoption records.

Separate records were kept of complaints, allegations and staff. The agency had a system to monitor the quality and adequacy of records and remedial action was taken to address these issues where necessary. There was evidence to confirm all the agency's adoption records were stored securely. The agency's adoption records though were all effectively safeguarded through an appropriate back up system. The agency had not developed a disaster recovery plan; specific to the adoption agency some attention should be given to this.

In selection of staff files seen, one file did not contain proof of identity in the form of a recent photograph and therefore did not comply with the adoption services regulations 2003. Discussion with the team manager confirmed that a recent photograph had been forwarded to the Human Resources section and should therefore have been on file at the time of the inspection.

A sample of Panel Members' files were also examined, however a number did not contain the information required in accordance with the adoption agencies regulations, for example, in one there were no references or a signed confidentiality statement, in others there was no employment history or documentary evidence of relevant qualifications. The shortfall found in the Personnel file, as well as the shortfalls found in panel members files must be urgently addressed.

The adoption agency had identifiable office premises. These were fit for purpose, however there was no lift in the premises and this lack of disabled access to the upper level of the premises made it difficult to appoint staff to the adoption team, who had difficulty accessing stairs. The authority needs to address this particularly given recent disability legislation.

SCORING OF OUTCOMES

This page summarises the assessment of the extent to which the National Minimum Standards for Adoption have been met and uses the following scale.

4 Standard Exceeded (Commendable) **3** Standard Met (No Shortfalls)
2 Standard Almost Met (Minor Shortfalls) **1** Standard Not Met (Major Shortfalls)

“X” in the standard met box denotes standard not assessed on this occasion
 “N/A” in the standard met box denotes standard not applicable

BEING HEALTHY	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
No NMS are mapped to this outcome	

MAKING A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
7	2
8	3
9	2
34	2

STAYING SAFE	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
2	3
4	2
5	3
10	3
11	3
12	2
13	2
15	3
19	3
24	N/A
32	3

ACHIEVING ECONOMIC WELLBEING	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
No NMS are mapped to this outcome	

ENJOYING AND ACHIEVING	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
6	3
18	3
33	3

MANAGEMENT	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
1	2
3	3
14	3
16	3
17	2
20	3
21	2
22	3
23	3
25	2
26	3
27	3
28	1
29	2
30	N/A
31	N/A

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection? One

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Voluntary Adoption and the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2003 or Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations 2003 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

No.	Standard	Regulation	Requirement	Timescale for action
1	AD2 & AD5	A. & C. Act 2002, Schedule 1.	The service must develop a whole systems approach to enhancing the quality of children’s assessments and reports.	30/05/07
2	AD11 AD19 AD28	LAAS Reg. '03 6(2)(c), 11(3)(d), 15(1) & Schedule 3 & 4	The manager of the service must ensure that information is held on all persons who work for the adoption service in accordance with Schedule 3 and 4. This applies to all panel members and specialist advisors, who provide services to the agency.	30/05/07
3	AD1	LAAS Reg. '03, Schedule 1.	The statement of purpose must be revised in accordance with the adoption agencies’ regulations.	30/05/07

RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations relate to National Minimum Standards and are seen as good practice for the Registered Provider/s to consider carrying out.

No.	Refer to Standard	Good Practice Recommendations
1	AD4	The establishment of preparation groups for second time adopters should be considered.
2	AD4	The agency should consider developing its health and safety checklist and pet questionnaire.
3	AD11	Consideration should be given to whether the service manager should undertake the role of panel vice chair, as this may at times give rise to a potential conflict of interests.
4	AD12	The panel minutes could be enhanced if the panel members present were recorded and a more detailed record kept of panel member's discussions.
5	AD13	The adoption service should ensure that the agency decision letter is sent out within the agency's prescribed timescales.
6	AD6	The service should review the staffing hours allocated to adoption support.
7	AD8	The independent and support service provided to birth parents and their families should be more actively promoted.
8	AD33	The intermediary service provided by the agency should be developed.
9	AD25	All agency records should be fully completed, signed and dated by the author and where relevant the manager.
10	AD29	A disaster recovery plan specific to adoption should be produced.
11	AD29	The lack of disabled access to the upper level of the adoption agency's premises should be addressed.

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