

London Borough of Wandsworth Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

Unique reference number	SC058212
Inspection date	15/03/2011
Inspector	Mike Stapley
Type of inspection	Key

Setting address	London Borough of Wandsworth, Town Hall, Wandsworth High Street, LONDON, SW18 2PU
Telephone number	020 8871 7187
Email	
Registered person	Wandsworth Borough Council
Registered manager	Ray Wright
Responsible individual	Paul Robinson
Date of last inspection	28/02/2008

© Crown copyright 2011

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services 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

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good: this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory: this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate: this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

The adoption agency of the London Borough of Wandsworth operates all the statutory duties it carries responsibility for under current legislation. This includes: the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters; the matching and placement of children with suitable families and support to people who have been affected by adoption.

The service operates from accessible premises in Wandsworth, South-West London.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This was a key, announced inspection, conducted over the course of one week by two inspectors.

The agency demonstrates excellent commitment to supporting children, adopters and birth families and sees this work as an integral part of maintaining positive outcomes for children in placement. This encourages inclusive and enabling practice. The quality, depth and range of the support provided, in addition to the uptake of the services and the positive impact on some of the users, is good. The promotion of equality and diversity is seen as outstanding.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last social care inspection of the adoption service in 2008, resulted in three statutory requirements and five recommendations. The requirements related to: the agency commencing the adoption preparation course prior to the completion of the application form; staff recruitment and ensuring the contents of the child's adoption file meet the requirements of current legislation.

The recommendations related to: ensuring that any conflict of interest declared in the adoption panel is clearly assessed and documented; developing a more strategic and proactive approach to the services provided to birth relatives once an adoption order is made; ensuring the initial written information sent to enquirers contains sufficient information about the eligibility criteria and the process for becoming an approved adopter; ensuring that the executive side of the council receive a six monthly report on the management and outcomes of the adoption agency and assessing the workload of the administrative post in the adoption team. The agency has acted upon all of these requirements and recommendations and they have now all been met.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The agency demonstrates an excellent awareness of the children who require adoptive families which enables it to undertake appropriate well focused recruitment activity. There is a clear, written recruitment strategy which demonstrates a number of innovative methods are used to attract potential adopters. Children who may require an adoptive family are referred to the adoption team in a timely way; good monitoring processes are in place to prevent drift. As a result children are placed for adoption without undue delay. Social workers demonstrated a sense of urgency to progress children's plans commenting that family finding is a team priority. Children's placement records seen were all at least of satisfactory quality with some high quality examples. All children who are of an age to express their views have those taken into account. The needs of children are highlighted further through a formalised meeting with the child's social worker and the family finder. Appropriate consideration is given to placing children with their siblings and with a family who meet their cultural, ethnic and religious needs. Placements are actively sort to match those with the most complex needs.

The recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters is a well thought out and comprehensive process. Prospective adopters value the quarterly information evenings, which give enquirers the opportunity to raise any particular issues. This is then followed up by an initial home visit. To enable a more comprehensive assessment two social workers from the adoption team undertake the home visit. If enquirers' interest is accepted, they are asked to complete a formal application prior to being invited to the next preparation training course. The preparation training is thorough and adopters say it is very useful. The agency undertakes robust checks including former partners, employers and other local authorities. There is also a comprehensive health and safety checklist which is reviewed on a regular basis. This process ensures as far as possible that the adoptive parents are appropriately safe to care for children.

Good quality assessments of adopters are analytical and competency-based; to ensure potential adopters have the appropriate parenting skills and resilience to meet the challenges of the adoption task. This information is used to add depth to the documents that are presented to the adoption panel as part of the assessment. Adopters valued the work of their assessing social workers describing it as 'extremely professional and thorough' and 'we had every reason to have full confidence in the process'.

The agency has an excellent, well thought out, formalised process for the matching,

linking and introduction of children to their adoptive family. Adopters are given clear information about this process, and are made aware of the National Adoption Register. Adopters confirm they received sufficient information to enable them to make an informed decision about whether the proposed placement is right for them and have the opportunity to meet foster carers, the medical adviser and any other relevant person. Once a placement is agreed, adopters sign a placement undertaking which outlines their duties and responsibilities to the child and the agency.

The agency has a good comprehensive set of policies and procedures which relate to the operation of the adoption panel. Adopters are actively engaged; they are invited to attend the panel, both for their approval and for matching. The provision of high quality information both verbally and in writing, ensures they know what to expect both during the assessment process and when they adopt. Adopters confirm that they were made very welcome and listened to.

The adoption panel is suitably constituted. A clear written policy and procedure about the handling of the functions of panel is in place. Applicants are invited to and made welcome at panel meetings. They feel well prepared for this. Meetings are effectively chaired covering all the issues and generally keep well to time. The panel effectively undertakes its quality assurance function. Panel members give appropriate and rigorous scrutiny to applications and provide feedback on the quality of cases being presented to ensure that service delivery is consistent and of good quality. Panel minutes clearly record the reasons for the recommendations made by the panel. The agency decision-maker ensures that the agency decision is taken without delay and that all information surrounding the case and the panel's recommendation is taken into account before making a considered and professional decision. Applicants are informed of the agency's decision both verbally and in writing in a timely manner.

The managers and staff of the agency are all appropriately qualified, experienced and demonstrate a high level of knowledge and understanding of adoption issues, legislation and current practice. Recruitment practice is robust and ensures that people working for the agency are suitable to work with children and vulnerable people. Staff have access to a range of relevant training including post qualification training.

The safeguarding procedures are well understood and make specific reference to children placed for adoption and staff are trained in these procedures on an ongoing basis. This promotes a workforce that is safe and suitable to provide a strong adoption service to children and families.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Adopters are well supported by a range of services provided by the authority. The authority is a member of the South London Adoption Consortium which has an information web-page for people interested in adopting. Social workers work a duty system where telephone enquirers can receive initial information about adoption and

are sent a comprehensive information pack. There are information evenings giving enquirers further information. A social worker will carry out a home visit which is part of the assessment process and successful applicants will be invited to attend a four-day preparation group and will be allocated a social worker who will conduct the assessment process. The pre-approval process and ongoing training provides applicants with extensive information about the reality of adoption including the long-term effects on children of birth trauma, attachment and loss. Following approval and after a child has been matched with potential adopters a specialist adoption support social worker will produce an adoption support plan which outlines how the ongoing needs of the young person and the adopters will be met. These plans are appropriately reviewed.

There are monthly support groups for adopters where they can access professional support and advice. However, these groups are poorly attended. There is also a 'parenting group' that offers adopters support with aspects of parenting in relation to adopted children. There is a quarterly newsletter giving information and advice to adopters. All adopters receive a year's free membership of Adoption UK following approval. Adopters are funded to attend any external training courses deemed necessary and can attend in-house training provided by the authority if appropriate.

The adoption service can access psychiatric and psychological support from the local child and adolescent mental health services team. There is also a group of multi-disciplinary professionals who support the adoption service by providing access to the medical expertise, clinical psychology assessments and educational support that is given to looked after children.

Later life letters and life story work for adopted children is carried out by placing social workers who can receive the specialist help they may need from the adoption support social workers within the team. The authority has a service level agreement with a local adoption support agency to provide counselling and support to birth parents whose children are adopted. Adopted adults seeking their birth records are assisted by team members before being referred to specialist agencies to conduct intermediary work including the tracing of birth family members. Providing support services to those people affected by adoption helps to promote their emotional well-being.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The voices and preferences of birth parents are considered at all relevant points during the matching and adoption process. This enables excellent consideration of matters pertaining to ethnic, cultural and religious matters. Parental views are an integral part of the adoption of their child. These are taken into account when choosing proposed adopters, unless this is not in the best interests of the child. The importance of a child understanding their background and origin is well recognised and supported by the service. Wherever possible a meeting is arranged between birth parents and adopters to provide a degree of

accord about the proposed placement. As previously stated birth parents whose children are adopted are offered high quality support and counselling from an adoption support agency that the authority has a service level agreement with.

Children and foster parents voices are heard during the adoption process by the production of an individual DVD for each child. This gives each individual child's story, by bringing the child to life and also supports matching.

There is a robust letterbox process in place which enables adoptive families, birth parents and other family members to maintain contact when practical. This service is regarded as a priority by the team. A senior member of the adoption team oversees this service and birth parents and adoptive parents are actively supported in constructing letters and using other methods of contact by employing the correct methods of communication which prevent inappropriate information that might impact a child's wellbeing from being exchanged.

Adoption support plans are clearly written and contain full assessments of children's needs. Plans contain the actions necessary to support children in the transition to their adoptive homes and the ongoing support they require. Potential adopters are given full information about a child's background including their medical history as far as it is known.

Consultation with birth parents and the promotion of agreed contact between birth parents, adoptive families and adopted children helps to ensure the long-term wellbeing of adopted children and birth families.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The Statement of Purpose is comprehensive, informative and easy to read, and taken in conjunction with the underpinning policies and procedures, provides a clear framework and direction for the operation of the agency. The standard children's guide, given in conjunction with the complaints leaflet, meets the requirements of the regulations. This is significantly complemented and enhanced by the production of 'A Children's guide to Adoption' known as Jessie's Story. This children's guide is very informative and creative and also contains a child-like summary of the agency's Statement of Purpose. The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The agency strives hard to ensure that due care and attention are given to issues of equality and diversity throughout the whole of its operations. Services are user-focused and tailored to meet individual needs. Service users report that contact they have with the agency is non-discriminatory and that they are treated with sensitivity and respect. Staff are provided with excellent support and training in this area.

Applicants receive good, well-written information at various stages of the process which enables them to be aware of what should happen next. Adopters commented that this was useful and they were clear about the children who need adoptive families. They report that Wandsworth is very welcoming and has a good understanding of diversity issues.

The agency is extremely well managed at all levels. There is an effective, strategic approach to improving outcomes for children which is supported by the operational activities of the agency. The appointment of a professional recruitment and marketing manager is seen as a key driver in the recruitment of more adopters and has meant that social workers can focus on the social work task of assessment and support. Social workers and managers alike have appropriate skills, qualifications, knowledge and experience and this is backed up by their enthusiasm and commitment to the work of the agency. There are clear lines of accountability and good communication, both between the management team and the staff group. The council lead for Children's Services is committed and kept informed of the agency's activities through written reports and monitoring systems. They demonstrate a clear understanding of the needs of children who are being considered for adoption. These mechanisms ensure there is good and effective scrutiny of the service.

There are sufficient administrative staff to support the work of the service, other staff commented that they were 'invaluable' and 'supportive'. Their skills are well utilised to provide a good quality of written and other materials and they are seen as very much part of the team.

Staff moral is good. Staff state that Wandsworth is a good place to work, being child-focused and supportive, and many staff, particularly those at a senior level have worked for the authority for a number of years. The turnover of staff is very low and efforts are made to retain staff through various means including flexible working arrangements.

All staff receive regular and effective supervision from their managers. The adoption team have good peer support and opportunities for external consultation when they are undertaking specialised pieces of work for complex cases. This shows a commitment to supporting staff and to ensuring work is carried out to a good, professional standard. Training needs are highlighted through the appraisal system and access to training is good. External training can be more difficult to access because of the cost, but the manager is committed to supporting staff in accessing this where possible.

High quality case records on adopters and children are well organised and allow relatively easy access to information, as they are indexed and provide basic information at the front. Records are signed, dated and legible and there is evidence of decisions signed off by management. Files are monitored on a regular basis by management and any shortfalls are discussed in supervision. Comprehensive policies and procedures are in place which detail the expectations of recording, security arrangements, confidentiality and access to records.

Personnel files, including panel members files are well organised and demonstrate a rigorous approach to the recruitment and selection of staff, including a very clear system for the recording of telephone verification of references. This is consistently implemented. The premises are appropriate for the needs of the service and are identifiable and accessible to the public. The IT systems are secure and there is a good business continuity plan in place. Adoption records are archived within storage facilities designed to keep the most sensitive data and documents safe and protected from environmental risks.