

City of London Corporation Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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Date of last inspection	19/01/2009

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About this inspection

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

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

The inspection judgements and what they mean

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

Service information

Brief description of the service

The adoption service for the City of London is based within the Community and Children's Services team. This team operates a generic service and only rarely places children for adoption. The authority does not provide all the adoption service facilities itself. It makes use of those provided by other suitable organisations who are permitted to offer the service in question.

The authority does not recruit potential adopters directly. Should it be approached by potential adopters of British children, it would refer them to an alternative agency. Should the enquirers be interested in inter country adoption, the City would process appropriate applications. Adoption support services are usually commissioned from external agencies.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

The City provides an adoption service that is sound overall. The support to children, adopters, birth parents and the maintenance of heritage are some of the areas identified as strong.

Assessments of potential adopters are thorough. Good attention is given to the ability of adopters to provide stable and nurturing environments. Good attention is also paid to the promotion of equality and diversity and adopters' capacity to meet the individual needs of the children. Outcomes for children have been good.

This organisation is committed to an agenda of improvement. Following a thorough review of the service a new strategy for long-term development has been put in place, aiming also to skill the internal staff in adoption work. This well thought out strategy, although recent, gives reassurance about the City's potential to develop the service consistently with the new Statement of Purpose and management's vision.

Recommendations arising from this inspection relate mainly to: decision making, panel processes and taking steps to promote the welfare of children, including when away from the country.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection, carried out in January 2009, there were five requirements and six recommendations set. The agency has acted on most of them, as part of its commitment to an agenda of overall improvement.

As a result staff recruitment processes are now robust; this better contributes to

safeguarding, by ensuring the suitability of people working for the purpose of adoption.

A Statement of Purpose, children's guide and associated policies and procedures have been developed or reviewed. This better guides staff and informs stakeholders about the service that is provided.

Training for staff and managers has been reconsidered. It is now better targeted to supporting the responsibilities relating to managing and working for the adoption service, as well as the generic tasks of the social work team.

The areas for improvement relating to the joint panel processes and decision making have not been satisfactorily addressed. These are raised again as recommendations.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The adoption service is committed to protecting children and endeavours to make them feel safe and be healthy. For example, the agency only places children with prospective adopters who have been comprehensively assessed, prepared for the task and approved, whether directly or by partner agencies. The assessments are of good quality and carefully consider the ability of adopters to keep the children safe and promote their health. This includes exploration of adopters' background and life histories. They also consider the attitudes of adopters on supporting children to take appropriate risks as a normal part of growing up, when of an appropriate age and understanding. They assess the ability of adopters to promote a healthy lifestyle and their willingness to support children in a range of positive activities that enhance their fun and their development. This has been acknowledged by a number of stakeholders, including adopters. Additionally, an independent person, concerned with scrutiny of assessment, said, for example: 'The level of work done is small, but very good'.

The panel reviews the quality of assessments and the potential of adopters to make children feel loved and secure. It looks at how issues of attachment have been explored and the support systems in place for adopters. It looks at how the premises have been assessed to make sure they are suitable and free from unreasonable hazards. The panel also reviews how children's health needs have been considered and how well adopters understand the importance of supporting children's emotional and physical development.

Social workers, when visiting adopters with children in placements, give attention to

the relationships between adopters and children. They assess, for example, the strength of the forming bonds and the love and affection adopters demonstrate towards their child. They speak with the children on their own, if old enough; they ascertain their views on issues such as what they like in their new family or what they are looking forward to. They explore diversity issues to ensure they are well addressed by the adopters. For inter-country adopters, in particular, this involves exploration of attachment and loss associated with moving to another country and the support the child may need.

Children's placements have been stable. The robust family finding and matching processes for domestic adoptions and the quality of assessments for inter-country adopters, have contributed to that.

The agency recognises the importance of achieving appropriate matches without undue delays. This has been successful and, in fact, there has been some excellent practice in the placement of a relinquished baby.

There has been a significant shortfall in safeguarding in relation to lack of action being taken to ensure that the welfare of a child would be promoted during a long absence from this country. This was not consistent with the general duty of care the authority should have exercised. While the outcomes for the child have been good, the potential for risk was substantial.

There have been no recent allegations or suspicions of harm involving the adoption service, but there is confidence that these would be handled effectively. The staff team is trained and experienced in child protection and the service is managed by a child protection professional. There are good relationships with partner agencies. For example, the local police service is very responsive and is committed to attend any strategy meeting where their presence is required.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

This agency offers good support to adopters and adults affected by adoption. Areas of need are identified well, services are tailored to meet them and improvements are effective.

Children are attending school or nursery and are progressing well in their education. Those who have recently arrived from another country are learning the language. All are engaging in the usual childhood activities, consistently with their age, stage of development and their peers. These include both school based and out of school pursuits. Social workers support adopters in creating the kind of environment where children can enjoy their interests and have fun. Therefore, they aim to ensure that children are well sustained in developing their emotional and intellectual skills, confidence and a sense of positive identity. Inter-country adopters are involved in support networks with others.

The attention given to matching and introductions, for domestic adoptions, is conducive to the development of sound relationships between children and adopters.

Children's health needs are identified well and plans drawn up to meet them. The service provided by the medical advisor, who is a paediatrician, has been said to be excellent by adopters, staff and panel representatives. She advises prospective adopters about actual and potential medical issues and meets with them to discuss these, if the adopters wish to. This gives an insight also into medical reasons for particular behaviours. The preparation for adopters and other training addresses how children's previous experiences can also manifest in challenging behaviour. Specialist services, such as psychological support and therapies, are offered when considered appropriate to address individual needs. For example, this might be about helping children to overcome some of the effects of neglect, trauma, loss or disrupted attachments.

After adoption, children and their families are supported through the post adoption services. The City does not offer a specialist adoption support service directly, due to its small size. However, it spots purchases what is needed from a provider whose expertise and skills in this area have been independently assessed.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency strives to maintain children's heritage, to help them make sense of their situation and to seek their views.

Much work has been channelled into encouraging all adopters, but particularly those adopting from overseas, into helping the child to maintain a positive self-image and a good understanding of her or his background. Adopters demonstrate their commitment to this. For example, by having done extensive research on the country the child comes from; making plans to visit with the child or learning the language. Adopters gather all possible information about the child's early life, including photographs of the place where they lived and of their carers. Adopters support children well and offer them strategies to tackle racist remarks.

All professionals involved recognise the importance of maintaining heritage. Children's permanency reports are subject to careful scrutiny at managerial and panel level and they are of a good quality overall. Efforts are made to involve birth parents in the adoption plans and collect their views. For example, there is evidence of good work with relinquishing birth mothers, taking into account their wishes and feelings. Support is provided to birth parents. They are made aware of a range of counselling, groups and other options that the City would purchase from a specialist adoption support agency. Thus birth parents are offered the opportunity to access services that are independent from the City.

Information for children about their early life is sensitively written, particularly about the reasons why they could not remain with their birth family. The service has

reviewed the arrangements for life story work; it has been channelling resources to ensure that staff have the necessary skills to provide a consistently good level of work in this area. Skills have improved and a designated staff member is gaining particular expertise to lead in this, under the supervision of an experienced professional.

There is good attention given to direct and indirect contact arrangements. The letter box system is being made more robust, with information leaflets for adopters and birth families. When appropriate, one off meetings with adopters and birth parents are encouraged and supported.

Children, who are of an appropriate age and level of understanding, have their views listened to and acted upon when possible. For example, looked after children in pre-adoptive placements are consulted by direct work and as part of the independent review process. The views of adopted children are sought regarding subsequent adoptions.

There is good practice by ensuring that all enquiries for birth records counselling and intermediary work are dealt by a social worker. Requests for services by adopted adults are very low. However, if requested, the City would endeavour to provide a timely and skilled service, by purchasing some of these from a specialist adoption support agency, as needed. This is appropriate for a small service.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The organisation of the adoption service is sound. One of the strongest areas is the commitment and capacity to improve demonstrated by management. There has been a thorough review of the service, with a full assessment of its strengths and weaknesses, followed by a well considered and realistic strategy. The strategy is aimed at developing the skills and expertise of staff in adoption work, thus reducing the dependence on externally commissioned services. This was done after realisation of gaps in the service and the risks that the previous strategy carried. The vision is consistent with what staff have embraced and has taken into account their longer term training and support needs.

The strategy is recent and has not yet embedded. However, it is comprehensive, well thought out and it has already had some positive impact. For example, adopters report that some previous delays in allocating assessments or in getting in touch with them have improved. Errors such as, in one recent case, the assessment starting before the application was received and thus before formal consent by the

prospective adopters, have been picked up. Annual reviews that had been missed are now being prepared. These and other identified errors are now less likely to reoccur because of better monitoring and more expertise being channelled into adoption.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. For example, this is well addressed in assessments and support arrangements. There is emphasis in involving birth parents in adoption plans and professionals fully recognise the importance of supporting heritage.

The main areas that have not been satisfactorily resolved relate to panel and decision making processes. These issues have been brought up both at the 2009 inspection and at the previous one of 2005.

Although a joint panel with a neighbouring authority has been established for a while, it is still perceived by adopters and professionals as the neighbouring authority's panel. The information for adopters does not explain that it is a joint panel. Panel minutes do not always give the reasons for recommendations; do not always clarify the roles of the panel members present and do not always give evidence that all essential considerations have been addressed. For example, when an approval for adoption and a match with prospective adopters were presented to panel at the same time for the same baby, the minutes show that the panel considered the match, but not the approval for adoption.

There is no evidence of a proper decision making process in all cases; one that considers all relevant information, as opposed to just ratifying the panel's recommendations. At times the process is also confused, with City's decisions being inappropriately made by the other authority's decision maker.

Records of decisions and other documentation do not always give evidence that all involved understand the essential difference between panel's role in making recommendations and the decision maker's role.

The above shortfalls in processes and decision making have implications in relation to the quality of monitoring and controlling in the adoption service. They also impinge on safeguarding. This is because the decision maker's role acts as the ultimate safeguard in ensuring suitability of adopters and of matches.

There are strong areas, though, in the operation of the panel. For example, it is chaired by a very experienced child care professional who is well regarded by the adoption team. Its membership comprises a mix of people with personal or professional experience of adoption and a range of appropriate skills. This is conducive to in- depth deliberations and well considered recommendations. Social workers think that the panel is thorough and asks appropriate questions. Adopters are encouraged to attend panel and have a say. They report that they are made to feel welcomed and that the chair endeavours to minimise anxiety. For example, she explains to them what to expect and the areas that will be raised with them; she informs them promptly of the recommendations that the panel is making.

There is also good practice in having set the decision maker's role at an appropriately senior level, to enable objectivity and the authority to take action if shortfalls in practice are identified. Management is aware that the new national minimum standards raise particular expectations regarding the qualifications and experience of the decision maker.

The City is attempting to recruit social workers and managers in the adoption service to permanent posts. There has been a considered recruitment campaign that, although not successful yet in recruiting to all posts, is starting to have some effect. Furthermore, staff like working for the City and report that they receive very good supervision, support and training. They say that managers are fair, accessible and helpful. For example, even a very senior manager was reported to be working alongside a social worker on a complex case. This kind of practice gives social workers reassurance and confidence. Social workers also consider that the service values diversity and, within appropriate boundaries, encourages their initiative, innovation and their professional judgement. There is very good practice in monitoring supervision case notes, thus strengthening managerial assessment of the quality of case work.

The newly completed Statement of Purpose and children's guide are clear and comprehensive, thus enabling users to be well informed about adoption and what it means for them. Some minor omissions are being addressed.

The City's approach, regarding domestic adoptions, is to use inter-agency adopters. This is appropriate in relation to the size of the service. Assessments of inter-country adopters are thorough and consider all the relevant matters relating to people adopting from overseas.

The recruitment procedure is robust, to ensure that only suitable people are employed and that they have the right competences for the tasks required of them.

Records are securely and confidentially stored and contribute to an understanding of the child's life. Adoption files are not fully compliant with the expectations of the regulations, but this is being addressed. The business continuity plan is well thought out and considers issues such as provision of an emergency service, staffing and alternative premises. However, it omits reference to the safeguarding and backup of records. There are excellent arrangements for the archiving and retrieving of adoption records.

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):

- take appropriate steps to ensure that the safety and welfare of children are promoted at all times, including when away from the country (NMS 4.1)

- review panel processes and ensure that panel minutes are clear and accurate (NMS 17)
- ensure that the agency makes appropriate decisions, consistently with the expectations of the relevant regulation (Breach of regulation 27 (1) (2) (3) - The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005)
- ensure that the agency decision maker has the qualifications and experience expected by the national minimum standards (NMS 23.17)
- review the business continuity plan to ensure that it contains reference to all relevant matters. (NMS 28.3)