

Thurrock Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Rosemary Dancer / Rosemary Chapman
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Setting address	PO Box 140, GRAYS, Essex, RM17 6TJ
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Telephone number	01375 652 614
Email	
Registered person	Thurrock Council
Registered manager	Diane Keens
Responsible individual	Robert McCulloch-Graham
Date of last inspection	15/12/2004

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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 agency of Thurrock Council undertakes all statutory work associated with adoption services. The adoption team is based in central premises in Grays. The team recruits, trains, assesses and supports adoptive parents. It provides a service to people wishing to adopt from another country. It offers counselling for parents wishing to place their child for adoption, for birth families who are not voluntarily relinquishing their children and for adopted adults.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

The agency has a thorough and committed approach to recruiting those adopters most likely to be able to meet the needs of children waiting for an adoptive placement. The agency carries out formal assessments of adopters, some of which would benefit from a more detailed analysis of the information gathered. The agency has good matching processes in place. The practice is supported by a strong adoption panel. However, there are some significant issues in respect of the constitution of the panel and the recruitment of staff and panel members. These two issues have the potential to place the safety and security of children at risk.

The support services to adoptive families are good. Careful assessment and review of support needs and a flexible approach in the delivery of services enable stable placements to be made and maintained. The agency demonstrates a long term commitment to supporting families and children.

The agency shows a commitment to working with birth parents and including them in the plans for their children's adoption. Life-story work is of a good quality although the timing of this work is an issue on some occasions. There is a letterbox system and assistance with letterbox contact is available. It provides a counselling and intermediary service to adopted adults and birth relatives who wish to trace.

The agency is overall well managed and has a good strategic approach to the provision of adoption services. Support to staff is good as is access for them to training. Managers and staff are appropriately qualified and experienced in adoption matters and overall demonstrated a high level of commitment to achieving good outcomes for children.

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency has made some improvements since the last key inspection. Following that inspection there were five actions and ten recommendations made. Of these,

three actions have been fully addressed, one action has been partly addressed and the fifth action has not been addressed. Of the recommendations six have been fully addressed three have been partly addressed and one has not been addressed. Specific areas of improvement which have been made are the support services available to adopters, the overall management and staffing arrangements for the adoption agency and the development of guides for children about adoption which are child focused.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

There are no standards mapped to this outcome area.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The individual needs of children who are likely to need an adoptive placement are identified in a timely way. A clear recruitment strategy is in place which is aimed at targeting adopters most likely to meet these needs. There is good collaboration between the agency and other members of the local adoption consortium and routine use of the national adoption register. There is a strong commitment to finding appropriate placements for children with more complex needs such as large sibling groups. Placement choice for children is maximised by this agency through these clear recruitment processes and practice and full consideration of individual children's wishes and feelings keeps the child at the centre of the recruitment and family finding processes.

There is a formal process in place in respect to the preparation, assessment and approval of adopters, although applications are taken after preparation courses have commenced. Adopters are fully informed about the complexities involved in adoption and parenting a child from the care system and feel well prepared. For people wishing to adopt a child from another country, specialist training in this area is available from an external agency.

The quality of the assessments of adopters are variable. Some assessments of adopters are thorough, probing and contain a detailed analysis of all information. These assessments provide a clear, evidenced based view, of the parenting capacity of the applicants and identify likely support needs at an early stage. Other assessments were less positive in that information provided by adopters was not fully analysed and they lacked a clear view about the applicants' parenting capacity. Improvements needed for all assessments include updating the health and safety checklist used, undertaking a full exploration of each applicants employment history and an expansion in the period over which other local authority checks are requested.

The agency has a thorough approach to matching which enables well-planned

matches to be made. Adopters are fully informed about the matching process and provided with full information about the child being placed. If there are medical issues, the medical adviser meets with adopters to ensure they understand these needs. The adoption and children's social workers work well together with foster carers and adopters in ensuring a good match is made and supported throughout the matching and placement processes.

The panel is not underpinned by up to date policies and procedures which are relevant to local need. There is a well-established practice of applicants and prospective adopters attending panel both for approval and matching. Adopters' attendance is sensitively and skilfully handled by the chair and panel members.

The panel, while well conducted and child focused, is not properly constituted. The chair to the panel has served a longer period than that allowed by regulations and the adoption manager, who acts as the adviser to panel, on one occasion chaired a panel. These issues have the potential for legal challenges to be made which may impact on the security of children's placements. The adoption team manager acts as the adviser to panel and in this situation there are implications in respect to conflicts of interests. The agency recognised and wants to improve the make-up of panel membership in terms of diversity and in achieving a more practice based social work membership.

Panel members are conscientious in their roles and enabled to develop their skills and knowledge about adoption through training provided to them. Panels are held in a timely way to ensure that any delays in cases being held are avoided. Panel members are provided with time to fully consider the papers for each panel as the papers are sent out to them before the panel hearing. Minutes of the proceedings are made but these do not include the panel's recommendations and reasons for them and they are not signed. The minutes also include some mistakes about attendees of one particular panel sitting and in the case of sibling groups do not consider each child separately.

The agency decision is timely and communicated in a timely way to the relevant people. However, while the decision maker has the papers at the same time as the panel members, she is not aware of the discussion during panel when making her decision, as the minutes are not routinely provided to her. The wording of the decision sheet and the letter sent out to inform the relevant people about the decision made, does not reflect that the decision maker has made a decision on behalf of the agency, rather than just having accepted the recommendations of the adoption panel.

The need to make telephone enquiries to verify written references is not stated in the recruitment procedure. The staff and panel member personnel files did not evidence in every case that a robust recruitment process had taken place. The practice in respect to internal transfers of staff does not require that an assessment of the applicants' level of skill and experience in adoption matters is carried out.

The agency uses local safeguarding procedures which have been developed in collaboration with two other neighbouring local authorities.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The approach the agency takes to supporting adoptive families is strong. The effective preparation of prospective adopters enables them to develop a clear understanding about the complex needs children in care can have. It is evident that adopters provided children with good support and encouragement in accessing and engaging in the services available. Adoption support plans individual to the family are drawn up before placement commences and are subject to review. Substantial financial packages of support are provided where there is an assessed need for this to ensure the stability of a placement. A range of general support services and activities are in place and are geared to support adoptive families in informal and more formal ways. Services include informal meetings such as a Christmas party and a summer fun day, more formal events are available such as post-approval training and an out of hours duty system. Adoptive families also have access to an excellent resource in the Oaktree Centre, a multi-disciplinary service for children in care, including children placed for adoption. The referral, assessment and subsequent services provided by this resource ensures that needs are met in the most appropriate way and the multi-disciplinary aspect of the service ensures all needs can be identified and worked with.

Children's health needs are identified through the medical examinations carried out by the medical adviser. The adviser makes himself available to meet with prospective adopters to help them fully understand the implications of any health needs prior to the point of the proposed placement. Arrangements between the agency and the health authority are not underpinned by a clear written arrangement in respect to these services. Legal advice is available to the adoption panel and to staff through the legal services department of the authority. Other professional advice is available via the Oaktree Centre.

There have not been any recent disruptions of placements made by this agency. There is a procedure in place in the event of a disruption of an adoptive placement. The independence of the person chairing such a meeting is not assured by the current procedures.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency is committed to working with birth families to encourage them to be as fully involved as is possible in the planning for their children. The child permanence reports record birth parents' wishes about their child and the agency offers support at an early stage from the adoption worker who is family finder for the child. The take up of this service is reported as not being very high. Where parents have

chosen to relinquish their baby, the agency practice is good. Sensitive work is carried out with the birth parents and other family members where appropriate.

Birth families are encouraged to contribute to their child's heritage. The agency has a commitment to gathering information about children's backgrounds and to life-story work and direct work to prepare children for adoption. Children have a good quality life-story book produced for them but sometimes these are not available until after an order has been granted. Later-life letters are developed but do not always provide helpful information to adoptees.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

There are no standards mapped to this outcome area.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The Statement of Purpose is a well-written informative document which is made available to all interested parties. While some policies and procedures need update and amendment, overall the statement is underpinned by the agency policy and procedure documents and these provide staff with a clear framework for their work. There are a range of children's guides each of which are aimed at different age groups and levels of abilities. These provide a child-focused overview of what adoption is about and the guides are very child focused. The information provided to enquirers and prospective adopters is well written and informative.

The shortfalls in the arrangements for panel relate to the organisation of the agency. However, overall the agency is well managed and there are clear lines of accountability. Managers are experienced and suitably qualified. The management team demonstrate a strong commitment to making and maintaining stable placements for children. The lines of communication between the management team and the staff are good. The arrangements for supervision of the team manager, while unusual, are working well and are subject to formal and informal review. The arrangements for monitoring the work of the agency are good.

The adoption team is carrying one vacancy but staff report that they are coping with this well. Supervision and training is of a good quality and staff report good support within the team, across children's teams and from the management. Staff value the supportive and inclusive management style. Adopters praised their social workers and find them to be supportive and reliable. The arrangements for business support to the teams are adequate.

Case records are well ordered and case recording is of a good standard. The content and quality of information contained within files is subject to audit and actions arising are followed up.

The agency maintains separate records for staff and panel members. These do not all contain evidence that a robust recruitment process has taken place in every case.

The premises are fit for purpose and located in a central position. The arrangements for ensuring the safety and security of the archived files are not adequate. The arrangements for the security of IT systems are adequate and there is a corporate business continuity plan in place.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
11	arrange for the panel to be chaired in accordance with the regulations and ensure that all panel recommendations and the resulting decisions which have been made are legally sound in each case (The Adoption Agency Regulations 2005 Regulation 10 (5) (a))	02/05/2008
19	ensure that a thorough and complete recruitment process takes place and is evidenced on all staff and panel members files (Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003 Regulation 15 Schedules 3 and 4)	28/03/2008

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- take the application for assessment of adopters prior to the preparation course (National Minimum Standard 4)
- ensure that all assessments of adopters show analysis of the information provided by adopters has taken place (National Minimum Standard 4)
- develop the health and safety questionnaire to include a confirmation section were actions identified have been addressed and include an assessment of any risk from poisonous plants, dangerous or ceremonial weapons and hanging cords (National Minimum Standard 4)
- include in adopters assessments reference requests from employers and checks with other local authority areas going back ten years (National Minimum Standard 4)

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- develop the panel policies and procedures in line with the standards and regulations (National Minimum Standard 10)
 - review the practice of the adoption manager being the adviser to panel (National Minimum Standard 11)
 - improve the accuracy and quality of the panel minutes and where cases involving sibling groups are heard ensure that minutes individual to each child are made (National Minimum Standard 12)
 - ensure the minutes of each panel are considered as a part of the decision making process (National Minimum Standard 12)
 - update the recruitment and selection procedure to include the making of telephone enquiries to verify written references. (National Minimum Standard 19)
 - ensure that meetings of disruptions of adoptive placements are chaired by a person independent from the agency (National Minimum Standard 6)
 - develop a written protocol for the work the medical adviser is expected to undertake (National Minimum Standard 18)
 - consider why the take up of birth parents of the counselling service to them is low (National Minimum Standard 8)
 - ensure that life story work is carried out in a timely way and that later-life letters provide useful information to adoptees about their adoption (National Minimum Standard 8)
 - ensure that a qualified social worker has sight of all written contact arrangements between adoptive and birth families (National Minimum Standard 8)
 - ensure that archived files are retained of 100 years and that the risk of damage to them are kept to the the minimum possible (National Minimum Standard 29)