

London Borough of Hillingdon Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

Unique reference number	SC055697
Inspection date	26/07/2007
Inspector	Rosemary Dancer / Sean White
Type of inspection	Key

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Date of last inspection	30/11/2004

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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 the London Borough of Hillingdon undertakes all statutory work associated with adoption services. It operates from the Civic Centre in Uxbridge. The duties it undertakes are as follows: the recruitment; preparation assessment and approval of adopters; both domestic and inter-country; the matching; introduction and placement of children with adopters; the support of adoption placements; post-adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, including birth records counselling and intermediary work; support to birth parents of children placed for adoption, or who have been adopted.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval processes are overall of a good quality. The support services to adoptive families and to birth family members are overall of a good quality, geared to individual needs and made available when required. The agency is well managed at all levels and is run effectively and efficiently. Staff are valued by managers and are well supported in providing a good adoption service to all affected by adoption. The London Borough of Hillingdon achieves safe, secure and stable adoptive placements for children.

Improvements since the last inspection

Following the inspection three years ago there were six requirements (actions) made. All of these were addressed. There were also 19 recommendations made; all of these have either been addressed or are no longer relevant to this service.

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 good.

The agency has a written recruitment strategy in place. There is a range of recruitment activity which is based on the needs of children coming through the

system. There are arrangements to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy; these need refinement.

The agency works closely with other authorities in the local consortium and has procedures for using the Adoption Register for England and Wales.

Most adopters are impressed with the agency response to their initial and subsequent contacts. Applicants are involved in a formal assessment, preparation and approval process. Adopters report that the preparation groups and assessment visits are informative. As a result adopters feel well prepared to parent a child from the care system.

Most assessments of applicants suitability to adopt viewed were of a reasonable quality. There were some gaps in some of the assessments at the stage the case was presented to the adoption panel. For example in one case there was some outstanding health information and in another case a couple were not interviewed separately. In addition not all adopters career histories include the months of their start and finish dates and the health and safety checklist does not include an assessment of the safe storage of dangerous weapons and a risk assessment in respect to hanging cords on window blinds.

The Child Permanence Reports (CPRs) are of a variable quality but are overall adequate to inform the matching processes. The agency has a thorough approach to matching children with adopters who will be able to meet their needs. Children's social workers reported that there is a good choice of adopters for the children they are placing and adopters overall felt well informed about the matching process and more importantly most felt well informed about the child's needs.

There are written policies and procedures in respect to the panels handling and functioning. The panel monitoring role is underdeveloped. There is a system in place to ensure that each assessment is edited in respect to any factual inaccuracies or spelling mistakes.

Adopters are invited to attend the panel at which their case is being heard. While the panel is properly constituted better representation of gender and ethnicity is to be addressed via the recruitment of new members. Panels are planned in advance and convened regularly. Panel members read the papers in advance and devise appropriate questions. The independent chair is suitably qualified and experienced in adoption matters and she chairs the panel in a competent manner.

New panel members are provided with an opportunity to observe a panel. The agency arranges training for panel members to ensure they keep up to date with adoption issues; this includes training in issues relating to inter-country adoption. The agency undertakes a thorough recruitment process for all panel members and the chair, including taking up Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks and requiring members to sign confidentiality agreements. The adoption manager who has responsibility for the assessments of the adopters is the adviser to panel; this poses some issues around conflict of interests.

The overall administration of the panel is good and papers are sent out to panel members in a timely way. The panel minutes do not consistently evidence that issues required by legislation to be considered by panel have been considered. Where a sibling group is being considered separate minutes are not always being made.

The decision-making process is efficient and well organised in terms of timescales; the relevant people are advised of the decision in a timely way.

The manager and social workers are suitably qualified and experienced in adoption work.

The agency uses the London Child Protection Procedures.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency provides good quality support services through a service level agreement with a registered adoption support agency, via the consortium and via its own resources. The planning of more individualised support commences in a timely way. Support plans are based on assessed needs and are reviewed over time. Independent Reviewing Officers are fully involved in reviewing and monitoring the support plans. Adopters are committed to ensuring the child or children placed with them understand their past history.

The agency arranges and supports letterbox and direct contact between adopted children and their birth families.

Birth records counselling and intermediary services are also provided. The agency has not developed clear written information about the assessment process and how this work is quality assured.

Some sensitive work is carried out with people touched by adoption. In one case an unqualified worker had carried out some intermediary work.

The agency has disruption procedures in place; disruptions are used as a learning process in this agency.

The access to legal and medical advice is good. The medical adviser is especially highly thought of by social workers and adopters. The agency also works with the Multi Agency Support Team and the local Children and Adolescent Mental Health Team; there are plans to further improve the links with these two services.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

There is a clear strategic approach taken to supporting birth families and good efforts are made to involve them in the planning for their child as far as is possible. The agency provides support services to birth parents and birth family members through a service level agreement with a registered adoption support agency and via its own resources. In one case commendable efforts had been made to trace a birth father. Where birth parents had expressed views about the plans for the child these were included on the CPRs; where parents did not wish to express their views this is not always recorded in these reports.

Birth parents are fully supported in meeting contact arrangements. The completion of life-story work and later life letters is monitored by the reviewing officers. Social workers reported some difficulties in preparing life-story books for children due to a lack of time and access to equipment such as scanners, printers and other resources required to do this work.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

There are no standards mapped to this outcome area.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

There is a Statement of Purpose in place which details the services provided. While the document is informative it does not fully meet regulations and it has not been formally approved. The agency has developed a useful guide for children about adoption; this is geared to the older and more able age range and would not be accessible to a younger or less able child. The agency has clear policies and procedures which provide a sound framework for the delivery of services. Staff have access to all policies and procedures.

The standard of the information provided to adopters is good; some adopters confirmed that this information is informative. There is a system to prioritise prospective adopters who were most likely to meet the needs of children waiting.

The nominated manager and her deputy have suitable professional and managerial qualifications and experience. The agency is well managed at all levels. There are clear lines of accountability throughout the agency and clear arrangements are in place for the management of the agency when the manager is absent. There are well established lines of communication across the adoption and area teams and across the management structure. All staff reported that they felt very well supported by their managers. The agency is run in accordance with the Statement of

Purpose.

There are systems in place for monitoring and controlling the work of the agency and a robust system in place to track children through the system to ensure their care plans are progressed in a timely way. The executive side of the council are not receiving a minimum of two written reports on the management and outcomes of the agency and the quality assurance system for assessments need to be strengthened.

The agency has sufficient qualified skilled and experienced adoption social workers to meet the expectations of the Statement of Purpose. There are some ongoing difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff in the area teams but these are being effectively managed. The social workers take an enthusiastic and committed approach to their respective roles and it is clear that they take a child-centred approach to their work. The management of workloads are effective and staff reported a good level of support from the managers via supervision, team meetings and less formal means such as informal supervision. The training opportunities for staff are excellent and staff reported that both internal and external training can be accessed and that this is extended to temporary workers. Administrative support was described as being insufficient in some of the teams; this relates to numbers of staff rather than the calibre of staff working for the agency.

The case files for children and adopters were overall adequate. However, the dividers used to section each file do not relate to the documents used in adoption work, not all files have records of supervisors decision making filed on them, some key documents are not signed by the relevant people and the file audit system in place is not fully utilised in every case. In addition on some children's files sibling groups are not always provided with individual panel minutes and the files do not contain information such as copies of life-story books or photographs of the child and his family.

There are clear arrangements in place in respect to access to records. Current records are appropriately stored. The arrangements for the storage of archived files are overall satisfactory. However, there is no assessment in place in respect to the risk of fire and there are no arrangements for back up of paper files.

The premises the agency operates from are accessible and appropriate for the purpose. The electronic systems are secure and there is a disaster recovery 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
10	ensure that panel do not make recommendations unless full information is available to it. Regulation 32 Adoption Agency Regulations 2005.	01/10/2007
1	amend the statement of purpose to include all information as required by regulation and ensure that it is formally approved. Regulation 2 Schedule 1 Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations 2003.	01/10/2007

Recommendations

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

- establish an effective system to evaluate the effectiveness of the recruitment strategy
- carry out individual interviews where a couple is being assessed, ensure that full employment dates of adopters are obtained, ensure that the health and safety checklist includes an assessment of risk of any dangerous weapons owned by adopters and a assessment of risk from hanging strings on window blinds
- develop a robust system for quality assuring assessment reports
- establish systems to ensure the monitoring role of the panel is effective
- review the policy that the adoption manager must be the adviser to the panel
- include the full panel discussion in the minutes and ensure that separate minutes are made for each child
- ensure that only qualified social workers carry out the intermediary support work
- establish clear processes for the assessment and monitoring of work in respect to members of the public who have been touched by adoption, such as adult adoptees
- ensure that where birth parents do not wish to express a view about the planning for their child this is recorded
- ensure that social workers have access to the tools they need to complete life story books
- develop a guide to adoption for younger or less able children.
- provide the executive side of the council with a minimum of two written reports a year
- review the arrangements for providing adoption and fieldworkers with administrative support.
- ensure that the contents of the case files for adopters and children are up to date, that all key documents are signed and dated and that the file audit system is fully utilised
- carry out a risk assessment of the archive arrangements in respect to the risk from fire and develop a back-up system for paper files