

London Borough of Richmond upon Thames Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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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

Richmond upon Thames's adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters. A similar service is provided to inter-country adopters; though preparation and some support services are provided through a local registered charity. The service, taking into account its size, deals with an above average number of inter country adopters.

The adoption service also undertakes the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters and the support of adoption placements.

A letterbox system, which supports the exchange of information in adoption placements is also provided and maintained. In addition, the service also supports post adoption contact, where necessary.

A post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, which includes birth records counselling and intermediary work is also provided.

There are arrangements for the independent counselling and support of birth parents and families through an independent agency.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The inspection of the London Borough of Richmond was an announced inspection.

The main focus of the inspection was to determine whether the branch was providing a qualitative adoption service, with the children's welfare, safety and needs at the centre of the adoption process and permanent, stable adoptive homes provided.

All the Adoption National Minimum Standards and the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003 were assessed under the outcome areas of Staying Safe, Enjoying and Achieving, Positive Contribution and Organisation. The adoption service was meeting the Adoption National Minimum Standards and the Adoption Agencies Regulations. Consequently, Staying Safe, Making a Positive Contribution and Organisation were judged as good, Enjoying and Achieving was judged as outstanding. Three recommendations were made in this inspection, one relates to ensuring adopters care for children safely, the second to quality assurance and the third to case records.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last full inspection of the London Borough of Richmond was carried out in September 2004, which resulted in nine actions and 11 recommendations being made. In February 2006, a visit was made to the adoption service to follow up these actions and recommendations. The service had addressed a number of these matters; however there were four actions and one recommendation, which related to the organisation of the service that had not been addressed. These actions and recommendations though had been met at the time of this inspection.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The adoption service has a good, effective recruitment strategy in place, which ensures there are sufficient adopters to meet the needs of those children requiring adoptive placements. There are clear processes and procedures to handle adoption enquiries and to follow up any expressions of interest. Information meetings are held on a regular basis and adopters were complimentary about the presentation and quality of information provided. Initial screening visits to prospective adopters are carried out, which highlights any issues that may need early exploration. It is a child focused service with children matched to adopters, who best meet their assessed needs. Siblings are also placed together, if this is assessed as appropriate.

The agency has a thorough preparation, assessment and approval process of adopters. Preparation training is tailored to meet the varying needs of adopters, for example, those wishing to adopt a child from overseas attend inter country preparation groups, which are provided in collaboration with another agency. Both domestic and inter country adopters spoke highly of the preparation training, stating that the materials used were 'well presented' and 'informative'.

Adopters' assessments are well documented and generally of a good standard. However, there were instances, where further exploration of some issues were required, for example, in one assessment the issue of harsh school discipline and the effects this may have had on the applicant was not fully addressed. In another, assessment, there was also some months not accounted for in relation to 1 of the applicant's employment history. However, the service does carry out all necessary enquiries and statutory checks in relation to prospective adopters and other members of the household, who are aged 18years or over. They also carry out employer references and checks with applicants' former partners, even if there are no children from the relationship. The agency ensures adopters are able to look after children in a safe manner through the use of a health and safety checklist. This

checklist though is not comprehensive.

Adopters' stated their assessments had been thorough and carried out by professional, knowledgeable, skilled and sensitive staff. Their report was accurate and given to adopters, in the required legislative timescale.

Adopters receive written information regarding the matching, introductory and placement processes in their post approval pack. Information is also provided regarding the National Adoption Register, the local adoption consortium and website.

There are clearly written adoption panel policies and procedures, which fully meet the adoption National Minimum Standards (NMS) and Regulations (Regs).

Adopters are invited to attend the adoption panel. Good preparatory work is undertaken with them prior to their attendance. Adopters stated that the chairperson and panel members 'welcomed' them, did their best to put them 'at ease' and the questions asked were 'appropriate' and 'pertinent'.

The panel is appropriately constituted and arranged at a frequency that avoids any delay in considering the approval of prospective adopters. The panel was well organised and chaired. Panel members were well prepared, made appropriate observations and asked relevant questions. Panel minutes are well-structured, informative and meet the Adoption National Minimum Standards.

The agency's decision maker' ensures all information relating to a case, as well as the panel minutes, are thoroughly scrutinised before making a decision. Notifications of the decision are generally sent out within the timescales. In one file though, there was a slight delay in the agency decision made, though the letter was sent to the adopters within timescale.

Staff recruitment systems are thorough and demonstrated that workers and managers appointed are suitable to undertake their responsibilities; all checks are routinely undertaken. The manager and all staff working within the adoption service are all appropriately qualified, knowledgeable, skilled and experienced in their work.

There is a safeguarding policy and procedure, which fully meets the adoption NMS and Regs. A good recording system is in place to enable staff to record safeguarding issues effectively. All those working in the service are well supported to handle and manage safeguarding issues.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Richmond fully recognises the importance of providing support to adopters in maintaining stable and permanent homes for children. A major investment in the development of adoption supports services has been made and a range of qualitative adoption support services developed.

These support services are provided through direct provision by Richmond, others in collaboration with the local adoption consortium, national charitable organisations and the children and adolescent mental health services (CAHMS).

The services include financial support packages, a quarterly news letter and support groups for adopters, young adopted children, an annual fun event and a rolling programme of training. A separate training programme is also offered to inter county adopters, which deals with issues specific to this area, for example, maintaining and promoting cultural, ethnic identity and racism. Richmond's multi-agency team is involved in supporting adopters and work is being undertaken in schools regarding the needs of adopted children. There is a good working relationship with the CAMHS, who provide training, consultation and direct work with families. Richmond also funds the first year's membership to Adoption UK and in partnership with this organisation provides a buddy scheme for adoptive parents. In addition, the authority subscribes to the inter country adoption centre, which provides specialist advice regarding inter country adoption to the borough's adopters.

Adopters are made aware of the support services available at an early stage of their contact with the agency and are confident such support would be provided, if required. Requests for support are responded to 'promptly' and the support provided, 'appropriate' and 'helpful'. Several adopters indicated that the 'effectiveness of the support' had enabled them to remain together, as a family. Written adoption support plans were of a good standard.

The agency has access to a variety of specialist advisers and there are written protocols in place regarding their roles. The service provided is of an extremely good standard and provides an invaluable asset to the overall processes of adoption and adoption support.

The agency's practice is service user focused. Those using the service are carefully listened to and their wishes and feelings considered. The agency considers the welfare and safety of the service user and others affected by the adoption when trying to determine whether a service should be provided.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency has a clear system to work with birth parents and their families in the care plans for their children. They are invited to participate in all reviews and their views and wishes are actively sought and recorded.

There is a clear commitment to preparing a child for adoption and in developing a coordinated, efficient approach to the production of life-story work. However, life story work is not carried out to a consistent standard, for whilst there were some good examples of such work, there were other examples, where there had been some delay in gathering information and completing the life story book.

Contact arrangements are well recorded. Direct contact is usually managed by the adopters; however, Richmond will provide adopters support, where the arrangements are difficult or complex. Arrangements for indirect contact are managed through the letter box system. This is a robust system and is managed in an effective and efficient manner.

The agency has a service level agreement with an independent organisation to offer independent support and counselling to birth parents and families. There are clear arrangements in place to monitor the effectiveness and value for money of this arrangement. There is a recognition that the uptake of this service could be improved and this is being actively addressed.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The London Borough of Richmond's adoption service is well managed.

The Statement of Purpose is comprehensive and contains all the information required under the Adoption Agencies NMS and Regs. Written policies and procedures have been revised in accordance with the Adoption and Children Act 2002. These documents are of a good standard, accurately reflect the Statement of Purpose and provide a clear framework for the service's operation.

The service has produced two Children's Guides, one for younger and older children. There is also a Children's Guide for children with communication difficulties, which was in draft form. These guides are extremely colourful, attractively presented, well thought out and in an age appropriate child friendly form. They are available in a variety of different formats to meet the differing needs of children and contain all the necessary information prescribed in the Adoption N M S and Regs.

Adopters are provided with well written and comprehensive information regarding the adoption process. The information provided makes it clear that people who are interested in becoming adoptive parents will be welcomed without prejudice and this is clearly reflected in the service's practice.

There is a system in place to prioritise the assessment of those prospective adopters, who are most likely to meet the needs of children waiting to be adopted.

The adoption manager is knowledgeable, experienced and skilled in childcare and adoption. She is committed to the adoption service and provides strong, effective

leadership to the service. She provides a good role model to staff and they speak highly of her.

There are clear written procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the adoption service. A supervisory and appraisal system is in place, which is used to monitor staff's performance and ensure a quality service. Staff are supervised and appraised in accordance with the agency's policies. The agency's administrative support is of a good standard and enables staff to carry out their work in an effective and efficient manner. The quality assurance systems in place are generally effective in monitoring the agency's performance, though some improvements are required. The Council's scrutiny committee is committed to the adoption of children as a positive choice for permanence and is kept fully informed of the agency's activities.

The adoption service's staff are clear about their roles and lines of accountability and communication are good. Staff are able to demonstrate knowledge, experience and skills in working with children in general and adoption in particular. They are encouraged and well supported in their work. Staff acknowledged they receive regular supervision, both on an informal and formal basis. The adoption service has sufficient staff resources to undertake the range of work required. Staff spoke positively of the wide range of training and professional development opportunities provided them, which they stated were of a good standard.

There are appropriate policies and procedures in place for case recording and access to records. Case records are well organised and generally in good order. However, whilst there is a file sampling and file audit system in place, there was no evidence of this on one file. In another file, a child's records had been incorrectly filed on the adopters' file. This had been noted in the file audit but no remedial action had been taken to address this matter. In some files, not all the case records were signed and dated.

The overall administration is efficient, well managed and appropriately structured. Adoption service records are securely stored.

Personnel and Panel Members files are well ordered and securely stored.

The premises are appropriately resourced and are fit for purpose.

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):

- improve the health and safety checklist for prospective adopters (NMS 4)
- ensure the system to monitor the quality and adequacy of records is consistently

- applied and remedial action is taken, when necessary (NMS 27)
- ensure case records are signed and dated by the author (NMS 27)