

Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

Unique reference number	SC056549
Inspection date	11/07/2008
Inspector	Rossella Volpi / Margaret Lynes
Type of inspection	Key

Setting address	Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames, Guildhall 2, KINGSTON UPON THAMES, Surrey, KT1 1EU
Telephone number	020 85476088
Email	
Registered person	Royal Borough of Kingston Upon Thames
Registered manager	Jennifer Rigby
Responsible individual	Duncan Clark
Date of last inspection	08/07/2005

© Crown copyright 2008

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 Royal Borough of Kingston provides a small, but comprehensive adoption service, undertaking all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and aiming to reflect the diversity of its community.

The service includes: recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters; assessment of applicants who wish to adopt from overseas; matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters; support for adopters, birth families and adopted children. A range of activities are undertaken in partnership with other agencies which, with Kingston, form the South West London adoption consortium.

The adoption team is managed on the day-to-day by the family placement manager.

The office premises are located in Kingston town centre.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

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

A well qualified and dedicated adoption team and a highly knowledgeable manager strive to ensure that adopters are found who can meet children's needs and promote equality.

Field social workers are committed to provide children with safe and secure family life. Important decisions such as suitability of carers and matching are appropriately scrutinised. There is a high level of satisfaction, although not unanimous, from adopters regarding the support received. Good access to medical and legal advice and the quality of training prepare adopters on the realities and challenges facing adopted children and families.

Staffing issues impact on aspects of the provision and, as a result, some areas of service delivery are of inconsistent quality. Field social workers do not have enough time to devote to adoption work and receive insufficient guidance and training. While there are structures in place to promote the maintenance of a child's heritage, there are shortfalls. For example, life story work and later life letters are, at times, completed after significant delays and contain errors or omissions. The practice of transferring cases between field social workers' teams at the time of matching means that the previous social worker's first-hand knowledge is lost.

Improvements since the last inspection

The previous inspection report, of July 2005, details eight requirements and 18 recommendations. The service has addressed the majority of those.

Recruitment strategies for adopters have been reviewed and made more inclusive. Child protection procedures now include issues relating to children placed for adoption. Significant other documents have been redrafted. Appropriate checks on adopters are undertaken to comply with the regulations. Birth parents have the opportunity to see and comment on what is written about them and their circumstances. A designated waiting area for prospective adopters attending panel is provided and storage of records has improved, following a risk assessment to make them secure.

The main area that has not yet been satisfactorily addressed relates to ensuring that there are sufficient staff working for the purpose of the adoption service. Partly as a consequence of this, other weaknesses identified at the previous inspection remain. These relate to: allocation of work; life story books; instituting life appreciation days to provide more first hand information about the child's life to adopters; all staff involved in adoption work receiving regular supervision, guidance and training. Additionally, the previous report recommended a review of office space to ensure both the wellbeing of staff working under crowded conditions and also an efficient and sensitive service to consumers. Larger premises are now provided, which have solved the overcrowding. The recommendation regarding formalised feedback, at regular intervals, from the panel chair to the agency, has not been acted upon, although the manager plans to introduce this in the near future.

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.

Children benefit from a service which endeavours to match them with adopters who best meet their assessed needs and reflect their ethnic origin. There is a well thought out recruitment strategy targeted at ensuring that adopters are found to meet the needs of children. Periodic review of the strategy also addresses whether it is effective in promoting equality. There has been some success in finding families for children with complex needs. Children's views and those of their birth families are sought. Following the placement of a child, reviews are conducted timely by independent reviewing officers.

Adopters' assessments are analytical and include vetting of applicants. An initial assessment of people expressing an interest in becoming adoptive parents is

undertaken, so that only those who are likely to be successful in their application are assessed. This both contributes to effective use of resources and also ensures that applicants are not given unrealistic expectations. There is formal preparation and approval process.

However, staffing issues impact on aspects of the service provision. For example, second opinion visits are not longer routinely conducted, unless there are specific issues. Child permanence reports are of variable quality. Field social workers say that they do not have enough time to devote to adoption work. The health and safety checklist used lacks some important references, for example to weapons, poisonous plants or hanging cords.

Nonetheless, the level of satisfaction of most adopters, about how their assessments are conducted, remains high. This shows that adopters benefit from the sensitivity and dedication of the adoption team. For example, adopters stated that they found the assessment reassuringly thorough; that everything was well explained; that their adoption social worker was approachable, professional and respectful. They commented, in relation to the adoption social workers: 'Absolutely amazing, no thank you is adequate', 'It is lovely that it is such a small team... Made all the difference to have such stability, gave us the confidence to continue and made it less traumatic' and 'Everything has worked as clockwork'.

Concerns are addressed appropriately by the adoption manager, who also advocates for adopters and children, when issues arise from the work of professionals in other departments.

Adopters much value the preparation training, describing it as 'an eye opener' or as 'invaluable'. They appreciate that it is delivered timely. However, preparation training has recently been reduced in frequency to twice per year.

The skills and expertise of the manager and staff and the stability of the adoption team contribute well to safeguarding. This is also enhanced by the appropriate scrutiny by elected members, panel and decision maker.

The adoption panel is strong, well prepared and conscientious. Thus it acts as an effective additional quality assurance mechanism; but there is no formalised and regular feedback to the agency on the quality of cases being presented. The chair is skilful in eliciting everybody's views and in keeping the panel focused on what the different issues arising really mean for the child. Decision making is timely and set at an appropriate senior level, to enable an objective view of each case. Elected members take a keen interest and are informed on adoption matters.

Staff receive training in safeguarding. There is also periodic joint training for adoption social workers and panel members.

Vetting of staff is in place to protect children, by ensuring that those working for the adoption service are qualified, experienced and suitable. Not all required information

is recorded on the individual files and some details for panel members have not been collected; however, this is being addressed.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Adopters benefit from vigorous adoption preparation and support, including financial and there are individual examples of excellent work.

The authority provides a range of support services, some of which are led by other agencies in the consortium. They include: a birth parents group; an adopted adults group; a parent and toddler drop-in group; an education drop-in centre; a children's group; training for teachers regarding looked-after children; a youth group and adoption support meetings. Birth mothers very much value their group and said that they would like it to expand, so as to reach more birth families.

The adoption team endeavours to ensure that prospective adopters appreciate the realities of raising adopted children, that they are able to promote anti-discriminatory practices and provide suitable and stable homes. The authority undertakes inter-country adoption work and offers a full service to inter-country adopters.

Most adopters are very positive about the support received. For example, they feel that they get prompt responses to queries and that they are well prepared in advance of the arrival of their matched child. Some adopters said that the whole process was an 'overwhelmingly positive experience' and made several complimentary comments regarding pre and post-adoption support, such as: 'Support was great; never felt we were on our own' and 'Support really outstanding, never seen better social work'.

Adopters say that training is generally of high quality and meets their needs.

Adopters benefit from specialist medical and legal advice; they may access a drop-in service provided by an educational psychologist and the adoption support worker, to discuss school issues. The designated nurse and the educational adviser for looked-after children are accessible to prospective adopters, prior to the making of the adoption order. The adoption team has no easy access to children mental health services and lacks sufficient specialist therapeutic input, although use is made of external agencies, when appropriate.

The adoption team is very proud of the quality of support they are able to offer in most cases. However, because of staffing issues, there are occasions when such support cannot be given to the extent that social workers consider appropriate; for example, to approved adopters with no child in placement. Additionally, gaps in the information and support provided for children, discussed below, also affect adopters.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

Children benefit from a service that recognises the life long implications of adoption. The authority attempts to engage birth parents in the future planning for their child and to encourage their contribution to the maintenance of their child's heritage. For example: birth families' views about adoption are sought and recorded; the content of the child's permanence report is shared with them; they have access to independent counselling and to a support worker independent of the child's social worker; efforts are made to obtain, for the child, information about life before the child's adoption. Direct contact arrangements are thoughtfully set out and well supported and there is an effective letterbox system. The authority provides support services to a range of people touched by adoption and offers counselling to birth families at any stage, following the making of an adoption order. There is a birth parents' support group, co-facilitated by a birth mother and the adoption support social worker. Birth mothers very much value such group and say that they would like it to expand, so as to reach more birth families.

Work related to the maintenance of a child's heritage is not always of good quality or it is not given due priority. Some field social workers have limited capacity and lack guidance or training in areas of their adoption related work. Consequently, life story work and later life letters are, at times, completed after significant delays and contain errors or omissions. Child permanence reports are of variable quality. Therefore, children who are adopted do not always have timely and appropriate information about their life before adoption. Such matters also impinge on the quality of assessments of children's needs, including attachment issues, which are important in long-term success of placements. Furthermore, the practice of transferring cases between field social workers' teams, around the time of matching, means that the previous social worker's first-hand knowledge is lost. The lead on decisions, at such a critical time, usually has had little or no previous involvement with the child and birth family. Comments from a range of stakeholders show wide consensus that such transfer is not good practice and that it affects the support offered to children and families. Appreciation days to provide more direct personal information about the child's life to adopters are not taking place because of staff shortages.

All this has the potential to impact negatively in the future on adopted people's understanding of their situation, although often the adoption team intervenes to address some of the shortfalls. It also impacts negatively on adopters who, at the time of placement, do not always have all the relevant information to fully appreciate the child's background and heritage.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

Those touched by adoption benefit from an experienced, qualified and dedicated adoption team who strive to find adopters who can meet children's needs and promote equality. This enables the agency to deliver a satisfactory service overall, with a number of good aspects, as discussed above in this report, despite the lack of sufficient resources. For example: all adoption staff have a clear understanding of expected timescales; the manager quality assures reports presented to adoption panel; there are regular meetings to check referrals and to allocate work; there is regular monitoring of adoption support. The manager has an excellent appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of the service and of what is required to address any shortfalls. She manages the service efficiently, but her effectiveness is compromised by the shortage of staff.

The service has carried vacancies for some time. This has had a detrimental effect on staff, who say that they are stressed and overworked. Such staffing issues impact on aspects of the provision. There are a number of areas where social workers cannot give due attention and some aspects of service delivery are of inconsistent quality. For example, elements of the assessments are done in less depth than it is considered good practice; support to approved adopters who do not have a child placed is, at times, marginalised. Staff have insufficient time to reflect, to critically evaluate their work with colleagues and for their own individual development. Furthermore, adoption workers have to carry out a number of administrative tasks, which reduces the time available for other work.

Field social workers, also, do not have enough time to devote to adoption and receive insufficient guidance and training. Some are unclear about what the panel expects regarding child permanence reports. They prioritise safeguarding, but there are some significant shortfalls in the work relating to the maintenance of children's heritage, as discussed above in the section on 'Positive Contribution'.

Information management systems are not developed enough to support management auditing or assessing the impact of particular activities. Through circumstances beyond local management's control, adoption work is not yet included in the computerised system for children's services, which went live in the borough over one year ago. This causes some difficulties when children are placed for adoption, as children's social work files are electronic.

The open plan office, which is shared with other teams, creates challenges for staff in maintaining confidentiality at all times.

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
19	ensure that staff and panel members' files contain all information required by regulations in respect of people working for the purpose of the adoption service. (The Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003, Regulation 11, Schedule 3)	28/11/2008
20	ensure that all persons working for the purposes of the adoption service receive appropriate training, supervision and guidance on adoption work (The Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003, Regulation 12)	31/01/2009
21	ensure that there is a sufficient number of staff working for the purposes of the adoption service. (The Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003, Regulation 10)	31/01/2009

Recommendations

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

- review the health and safety checklist for prospective adopters. (National Minimum Standard 4)
- ensure formalised and regular feedback, from the panel chair to the agency, on the quality of cases presented to the adoption panel. (National Minimum Standard 10)
- ensure that the adoption team has easy access to specialist therapeutic input appropriate to its needs. (National Minimum Standard 18)
- institute life-appreciation days, as part of the placing process, to provide more first-hand, accurate information about the child's life to adopters. (National Minimum Standard 8)
- review the practice of transferring cases between field social workers' teams, around the time of matching. (National Minimum Standard 8)
- make arrangements for life-story work, including the production of later-life letters, to be given due emphasis and ensure quality pieces of work. (National Minimum Standard 8)
- develop information systems that effectively support managerial review of activities. (National Minimum Standard 20)
- ensure that the office offers adequate means for maintaining confidentiality. (National Minimum Standard 29)

