

London Borough of Hounslow Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Rosemary Chapman / Rossella Volpi
Type of inspection	Key

Setting address	London Borough of Hounslow, Pavilion BF Family Placement Section, Adoption and Permanence Team,, Civic Centre, Lampton Road, Hounslow, TW3 4DN
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Responsible individual	
Date of last inspection	15/08/2005

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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 and Permanence team for the London Borough of Hounslow is located within Children's Services and Lifelong Learning, which is based at the Civic Centre in Hounslow. It provides a comprehensive adoption service which includes advice and counselling; recruitment, assessment, approval, training and support of prospective adopters, including those who wish to adopt from overseas; the matching, introduction and placing of children for whom adoption is the permanence plan; post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption including birth records counselling and intermediary services. It also provides a service for step parent and relative adoption, kinship care and special guardianship, which are not considered in this report.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This inspection was a key, announced inspection. The agency is very clear about the service it provides through its comprehensive policies and procedures which give good, clear guidance to staff. It is welcoming to those who are interested in adoption and has a strong commitment to equality and diversity. Staff work well together and receive regular and effective support and supervision from the management team. The systems for the preparation and assessment of adopters ensure that children are safeguarded, the adoption panel is robust and the agency receives good scrutiny at a number of levels. The support of adopters is effective and the post adoption service to birth parents, particularly in relation to contact arrangements is good. This ensures that the service to children and adoptive families is strong, professional and effective.

Some areas could be developed and expanded; these include the services to birth parents prior to adoption including the notification of the agency decision, the more timely provision of life story books to children and some improvements to documentation.

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency had six actions and 20 recommendations following the previous inspection. The actions have been completed and all but two of the recommendations have been fully addressed. The remaining two have been partly addressed.

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 agency demonstrates a good awareness of the children who require adoptive families, which enables it to undertake appropriate recruitment activity. There is a clear, written recruitment strategy which details a number of methods used to attract potential adopters. There are formalised procedures to ensure that any child who may require an adoptive family is referred to the adoption team in a timely way, good monitoring processes are in place to prevent drift and the evidence shows that children are placed without undue delay. Social workers commented that there is a sense of urgency to progress children's plans and family finding is a priority. Children who are of an age to express their views have those taken into account. The needs of children are highlighted through a formalised meeting with the child's social worker and the family finder, and appropriate consideration is given to placing children with their siblings and with a family who meet their cultural, ethnic and religious needs.

The agency has a formalised process for the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adoptive families. It holds regular information meetings, followed up with an initial visit by two social workers, the findings of which are discussed by the whole team. This process enables a thorough consideration to be given to the strengths and weaknesses of the potential applicants and an informed decision is made about whether or not to progress the application. The preparation course is well received by applicants. They say they feel safe, they can speak up, trainers listen, it is helpful, thought-provoking and has altered their views on issues regarding the birth family and contact.

Assessments are analytical and competency-based, to ensure potential adopters have the appropriate parenting skills and resilience to meet the challenges of the adoption task. A range of checks and references are sought to ensure applicants are appropriate and safe to care for children and health and safety issues are considered. The health and safety checklist however, is not comprehensive.

The agency has a good, well thought out, formalised process for the matching, linking and introduction of children to their adoptive family. Adopters are given clear information about this process, and are made aware of the National Adoption Register and the West London Consortium arrangements. Adopters confirmed they received sufficient information to enable them to make an informed decision about whether the proposed placement was right for them and had the opportunity to meet foster carers, the medical adviser and any other relevant person. Once a placement is agreed, adopters sign a placement undertaking which outlines their

duties and responsibilities to the child and the agency.

The agency has a comprehensive set of policies and procedures which relate to the operation of the adoption panel. Adopters are invited to attend the panel, both for their approval and for matching, and are given information both verbally and in writing, to ensure they know what to expect. Adopters confirmed that they were made welcome and listened to.

The panel is appropriately constituted with a range of members who offer a variety of skills and experience. The recruitment checks are appropriate, there is evidence that they observe the panel prior to commencing as a voting member, undertake an induction and have ongoing training. Panels are convened frequently, with the facility to hold extra panels in an emergency. Staff confirmed that they could book panel dates without delays and that children's cases are given a priority. The administration of the panel ensures that panel members receive their papers in good time, to enable them to read them thoroughly and in advance, and that they are sent out with appropriate security, to maintain confidentiality.

The minutes are full and reflect the discussion of the panel. Minor improvements to these were discussed and a new format implemented during the inspection.

The agency decision maker takes her role seriously and has access to all the information to enable her to make her decision in a considered manner. However, there are occasions when the decision is not made within the appropriate timescales. The decision is conveyed to adopters verbally and in writing, but birth parents do not receive the agency decision in writing.

The managers and staff are appointed by robust recruitment and selection procedures, and all are suitably qualified, skilled, experienced, knowledgeable. The safeguarding procedures make specific reference to children placed for adoption and staff are trained in these procedures on an ongoing basis. This promotes a workforce which is safe and suitable to provide a strong adoption service to children and families.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency provides a good level of support to adoptive families, both before and after the making of an adoption order, to promote effective placements. Adopters feel well prepared by the training and assessment process and generally receive frequent visits from their social worker. Adopters demonstrate a positive attitude to the birth family and the child's origins, and are aware of the need to keep memorabilia.

The agency has comprehensive procedures in place for all aspects of adoption support, which underpin the working of the service. The assistant team manager for adoption support is involved in the permanency planning meetings to ensure that

post placement support and contact issues are highlighted, and appropriate services put in place at an early stage. This is good practice and provides a proactive approach to supporting families and promoting long-lasting and effective placements. There are a number of ways in which adoptive families are supported post adoption order. These include regular communication from the agency via the newsletter, social events, training workshops and the daily duty system which provides advice and support. Adopters are also supported during the contact arrangements. An assessment for support services is carried out when requested, and an assessment seen was appropriate and comprehensive, identifying needs and ways of meeting these. Financial support is also provided through the adoption allowance system and occasional one-off payments. The original support plan is re-visited when adopters require assistance.

The agency has access to medical and legal advice, both of which are said by staff to be accessible and helpful. The medical adviser is happy to see adopters to discuss any health implications for children proposed to be placed with them, and is prompt and knowledgeable. There is access to psychological input, both from professionals within the adoption service and through external services.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency shows a commitment to the lifelong implications of adoption for the birth family, which is acted upon in practice. Birth parents are involved in contributing to the planning for their children and consulted about their wishes and feelings. Where possible, these are recorded on the Child Permanence Report (CPR). Children's views are also sought where appropriate and recorded on the CPR. The agency has an independent service for birth families, which offers four counselling sessions. However, some of the social workers did not have a clear understanding or awareness of the service, and its remit is specifically counselling, but not support and information-giving.

Social workers are aware of the importance of life story work with children. The looked after children's project team has been set up specifically to work with children who have a plan for adoption once the legal proceedings are completed. This team undertakes work with most of the children who have this plan, although the capacity of the team determines whether or not a child's case can be transferred to them. These social workers have the time and expertise to undertake reflective, research-based work to prepare children for the move to an adoptive family. The expectation is for the life story book to be ready for the child once they are placed with their adoptive family. However, this is not always the case and some delay has been identified.

There is a good understanding about the importance of maintaining a child's heritage. This is facilitated by one-off meetings between adopters and birth families, when information is shared about the child's family of origin for the child's benefit in the future. The arrangements for both indirect and direct contact are very good.

There is a robust letterbox system in place, which is underpinned by good procedures, guidance on letter-writing for adopters and birth parents, and the issue of continuing the letterbox for post 18-years-old is addressed well and sensitively. The team will assist with letter-writing and this also provides an avenue for both birth parents and adopters to access support in relation to other matters. However, the lack of administrative support for the letterbox determines that social work time is spent on these tasks rather than other professional issues or the further development of the service. The post adoption team have also started a group for birth mothers and has tried to have a group for birth fathers, but this latter proved unsuccessful.

The post adoption team are involved in a number of direct contacts which they supervise. These arrangements are underpinned by comprehensive agreements about expectations of behaviour and conduct, to facilitate the smooth running of these situations. The visits are undertaken sensitively and professionally to ensure that contact is a positive experience for all parties and that it continues for the child's benefit. Birth family members expressed a high degree of satisfaction with their experience of direct contact and were full of praise for the social workers' support and willingness to spend time at weekends and holidays to promote and facilitate the arrangements. There is clear respect for, and consideration of the welfare of, all parties.

The agency also undertakes work with adopted adults, including birth records counselling, Birth Relatives Initiated Contact (BRIC), intermediary services and support for reunions. Again, the evidence seen shows this to be undertaken with particular sensitivity and an awareness of the needs of all involved.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency has a written statement of purpose which has been approved by the executive in June 2008. This clearly sets out the aims and objectives of the adoption service and is underpinned by a comprehensive set of policies and procedures which are of a very high standard. The Children's Guide, given in conjunction with the complaints leaflet, meets the requirements of the regulations and the agency is developing a suitable booklet for use with younger children.

People who are interested in knowing more about becoming adoptive parents are given clear written information about the process and the needs of children who are requiring an adoptive family. They report that Hounslow is very welcoming and has a good understanding of diversity issues.

The adoption agency is well managed by people who are skilled, knowledgeable, qualified, experienced and committed to the service. Management arrangements are well defined with clear roles, responsibilities and lines of accountability. Staff are well supported through regular supervision, team meetings and access to training.

The executive side of the Council has good mechanisms for keeping itself informed through quarterly information reports, regular meetings with senior officers and the corporate parenting panel. The adoption service provides a report twice a year on its management and outcomes. These mechanisms ensure there is good and effective scrutiny of the service.

The staffing levels are adequate for the provision of the service. However, the post adoption team have no dedicated administrative support, which, if provided, would free up time for the social workers to develop the post adoption service further.

Staff report that Hounslow is a good place to work, being child-focused and supportive, and many staff, particularly in the adoption service, have worked for the Borough for a number of years. This provides a stable work force and consistency of service.

Case records on adopters and children are well organised and allow easy access to information, as they are indexed, provide basic information and chronologies at the front. Records are signed, dated and legible and there is clear evidence of decisions by supervisors and audits in place. Records are stored securely and there are procedures in place for access.

Personnel files contained all the information required and there are plans to improve their organisation to enable easier and more effective management auditing. Panel members' files are well organised and similarly contained all the necessary information.

The premises are appropriate for the needs of the service and are identifiable and accessible to the public. There are plans to improve the arrangements for archiving once the location of the adoption service is definite. There is no disaster recovery plan which refers to the provision of premises and safeguarding and backup of records.

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
13	ensure that birth parents receive the agency decision in writing, both in relation to the child's approval for adoption and the match (Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 Regulation 19 and 33).	14/11/2008

Recommendations

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

- develop the health and safety checklist to include areas such as guns, dangerous weapons, hanging cords and poisonous plants (National Minimum Standard 4)
- ensure the agency decision is made in a timely way (National Minimum Standard 13)
- ensure that there is a clear process for referring birth parents to the independent service and consider extending the scope to cover support and information-giving (National Minimum Standard 7)
- ensure that life story books are available for children in a timely way when they are placed for adoption (National Minimum Standard 7)
- consider providing administrative support to the letterbox scheme to enable social work time to be spent more appropriately and productively (National Minimum Standard 8)
- provide a written disaster recovery plan which refers to the provision of premises and the backup and safeguarding of records (National Minimum Standard 29).