

London Borough of Newham Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Rossella Volpi / Paul Clark
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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

Newham Adoption Service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and aims to reflect the diversity of its community.

It recruits and assesses prospective adopters. The adoption and fostering recruitment teams joined together in April 2006, aiming to provide a consistent approach to recruitment and assessment. Where necessary independent assessments are commissioned. Newham also undertakes assessments of applicants who wish to adopt from overseas and step parent adoptions.

Through the adoption support team Newham finds families for all children whose care plan is adoption and offers support to prospective and approved adopters.

Newham has an agreement with a specialist external resource to provide additional services, including birth records counselling and intermediary work.

The office premises are located in East Ham. Newham is part of the East London Adoption Consortium. Therefore, it provides advice to prospective applicants about the other local authorities in the consortium, where applicants do not match the needs of Newham's children.

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.

Those touched by adoption benefit from an agency with a clear sense of purpose and an agenda of improvement, striving to provide positive outcomes for children through permanency.

There is strong commitment to matching children with the most suitable families to give them a good chance in life and to recoup some of the obstacles they had.

Issues of diversity are given due emphasis. Newham inclusive recruitment policy encourages applications from prospective adopters from a wide range of backgrounds, ethnicity, from those with disabilities or from people who are single, lesbian or gay.

Adopters feel well supported by the agency and say that their individual worker maintains contact after their approval, right through to the adoption order being made and beyond, as necessary. There is good access to medical and legal advice.

Support for birth parents, post adoption, is good. The work undertaken to set and maintain direct and indirect contact demonstrates commitment to the delivery of a high quality service. Pre-adoption support is insufficient and uptake of what is provided is minimal.

The way staff are organised and supported does not always contribute to ensuring that those touched by adoption receive a good standard of service at all times.

However, the progress the authority has made in a relatively short period of time is significant and there are realistic plans to address the remaining challenges.

Improvements since the last inspection

The report of the previous full inspection, September 2005, details four requirements and 11 recommendations. The service has well addressed the majority of these and is taking steady and realistic steps to address the shortfalls still remaining.

The authority has re-designed the Statement of Purpose and has now in place written information for prospective adopters, inter-country adopters and approved adopters, to enable them to make clear decisions about adoption issues and placements. Children have access to a guide to adoption.

There are robust recruitment checks, to ensure suitability of staff and panel members.

The authority has addressed the major staffing issues faced at the time of the last full inspection. However, recruitment and retention of suitable social work staff has remained a challenge. There are managerial quality assurance mechanisms, which stakeholders consider to be effective and which underpin the improvement agenda. Vacancies still create challenges for the consistent conduct of all managerial functions.

The quality of the assessments of suitability of prospective adopters is now generally satisfactory. Prospective and approved adopters are prepared and supported. They receive the necessary written information about the matching process and about children whose needs they might be suitable to meet.

The service has a strategy for working with birth families and seeks their views, but uptake of services before adoption is still minimal.

Records have been reviewed and, overall, service records are up to date and relevant. There are separate records for complaints and allegations, which are regularly appraised and inform managerial reviews.

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 an agency which is committed to matching them with the most suitable families, which strives to give them a good chance in life and to recoup some of the obstacles they had. Adopters benefit from good relationships with the agency and good responses.

Adopters are provided with written information about the matching process and about children whose needs they might be well placed to meet. Adopters say that the quality of the information is such that it helps them understand the needs and background of the child. They have good opportunities to discuss the implications for them and their family. Meetings with the agency medical adviser are particularly valued by the adopters. Children's social workers feel supported in decision making and see it as a professional and joint process.

Matching takes good account of equality and diversity issues and most children are placed with adopters who well reflect their ethnicity. Newham has had some success in placing older children; also there have been recent managerial reviews to ensure that children with disabilities do not suffer from undue delays.

Disruptions have been low and the agency has addressed thoroughly concerns that have arisen, with strong and decisive action to protect children.

The agency works closely with other authorities in the local consortium and has clear procedures for using the national adoption register. This means that children can be promptly referred outside Newham, thus minimising delays in finding suitable matches.

The adoption service ensures that prospective adopters are recruited, prepared and supported at all stages of the process. This is also aided by the efforts of a publicity officer who is up to date with the needs of children requiring placements. She liaises with colleagues in other local authorities to increase the success of the campaigns targeted at finding matches for Newham children whose care plan is adoption.

Prospective adopters are welcomed without prejudice, in fact most commented very positively about this; as well as about the sensitivity and efforts of their social workers to make them feel at ease during the assessment process.

The quality of the assessments of suitability of prospective adopters is variable, with some lacking in depth and analysis. However, statutory checks and references are

routinely carried out. The information provided by children's social workers in permanence reports is also of an uneven standard.

Health and safety checks are made on all prospective adoptive families but the checklist is lacking some detail in respect of applicants' homes, for example: hanging cords on curtains; poisonous plants; firearms; or other weapons.

The ability to assess suitability of adopters and to make appropriate matches is strengthened by the work of the adoption panel, which acts as an effective additional quality assurance mechanism. The approach of the panel concentrates on the child's future welfare and safety, with thorough deliberations and detailed analysis of all the information available. The panel is skilled at identifying gaps and confident in requesting additional work or information, if necessary.

The panel has a good range of expertise and is attempting to achieve a more ethnically diverse membership. New panel members are vetted and have an induction which includes observation of the panel prior to sitting. All members are annually appraised. There is excellent conduct of panel chairing and of the panel advice function.

The arrangements for administering and managing panel business are very well organised. The panel sits frequently enough to avoid delay in the plans for children. Minutes are thorough and promptly completed.

Decision-making is undertaken with due conscientiousness and within tight timescales. It is set at an appropriately senior level, so as to enable an objective view of each case and the capability to take action in response to issues arising. Decisions are formally conveyed in writing to adopters, but not always to parents. The wording in some documentation is being revised to better reflect that the agency is making the decision, rather than ratifying or endorsing the panel's recommendation.

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

Robust vetting of staff is in place to protect children, by ensuring that those working for the adoption service are qualified, experienced and suitable. Although written references are followed up verbally, no written record is made to evidence this.

An important safeguard in place to protect children is that the adoption service is overseen by a very experienced and qualified senior service manager.

The preparation of adopters is carried out in a formal and systematic way and it is comprehensive in the range of issues covered.

Prospective adopters and foster carers attend joint preparation trainings. There is a mixed response from adopters about such practice. Some value the sharing of experiences and say that they are well informed and suitably prepared for their chosen path. Others feel that in a mixed group they cannot fully explore the

differences in personal issues and that it is not conducive to making links with other adopters.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Support services have been developed and adopters now benefit from a cohesive and consistent approach to ensure that children are able to fulfil their potential within their adoptive placements.

A permanent adoption support team manager and staff team enable the formal strategy to work well in practice. The joining of the support and family finding functions means that there is good information available to inform the plans and that issues can be addressed promptly.

Adoption social workers liaise with children's social workers to enable placements to settle and develop as a new family. Much emphasis is given to ensuring that adopters understand the implications of raising adopted children and of promoting the development of a positive self-identity.

Adopters generally say that they feel well supported by the agency and that their individual worker maintains contact after their approval, right through to the adoption order being made and beyond, as necessary.

Placement disruptions are reviewed and the agency uses the outcomes of such reviews to look at their practice.

There is a reasonable budget allocated to adoption support, thus services are commissioned to external agencies, when appropriate. Case records demonstrate that this is done to meet individual needs, including therapy and bespoke training, to adoptive parents and their children.

Services are offered to a wide range of people touched by adoption, also through an external agency with whom Newham has a service level agreement, these include: support to adopted adults who wish to trace their birth families; birth records counselling; direct contact between adopted children and their birth families.

Other specialist advice that informs the support services is provided by both the medical and the legal advisers. There is easy access to children's mental health services. There is access to specialist education services helping to manage a wide range of issues. For example, a specialist education support project for looked after children also offers advice to adopters about educational needs and makes referrals to the educational psychologist, if necessary.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

Service users benefit from an agency that recognises the lifelong implications of adoption and provides services based on individual needs, identified by a professional assessment. Newham listens to users' wishes and feelings and considers their welfare.

Where Newham is not able to meet the particular needs or cannot directly offer the specific service requested, it makes referrals to an external provider. Newham has a service level agreement with a voluntary adoption agency for independent support to birth families.

Overall Newham strives to support birth families throughout the adoption process but the stage at which birth parents counselling commences is too late. Pre-adoption work with birth relatives is insufficient and there is minimal uptake of what is available. This means that birth families are not often sufficiently involved at a key time in the adoption process. Additionally, they are not always formally notified in writing of some important decisions by the authority regarding their child's care plan for adoption.

Adoption managers oversee the advice and assistance given to those affected by adoption and inform the local authority of the arrangement for securing provision of services. However, there is no designated person formally appointed to the role of the adoption services support adviser.

Field social workers fully appreciate the importance of life-story work and of child permanence reports. They have opportunities to undertake some specific training. However, child permanence reports are of variable quality and the agency's practices in respect of developing life-story work are somewhat inconsistent. There are good examples of life-story work being undertaken, but often it is not completed at the appropriate time. Social workers say that they lack the resources to complete life story work to the standard they consider necessary to fulfil its function well and they do not have enough time to always involve birth families fully, even when it would be possible to do so. This impinges on the information the child has about his or her early life.

Staff have found that the practice of transferring cases between field social workers teams, around the time of matching, has meant that the previous social worker's first-hand knowledge is partly lost. However, such practice has now been reviewed and management expects that the new arrangements in place are better posed to retain such vital information, as well as minimise drift in care planning.

Contact with birth families is actively discussed at every stage of the adoption process. The agency supports a number of direct contact arrangements and a sensitive approach is taken to this work. There is a well managed letterbox system in place, which now ensures that letters are received in a timely way and which assists

with writing and translation, when necessary. The work undertaken demonstrates a commitment to providing a high quality service.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

Those touched by adoption benefit from a service with a well defined purpose, so that there is clarity about what the authority sets itself to do; this is mainly acted upon in practice, with all striving to achieve the aims and objectives, value diversity and promote equality.

The authority is committed to an agenda of improvement. There have been consistent steps taken to address those shortfalls noted at the previous full inspection and those additional ones that the authority identified. Key to this has been a concerted effort in recruitment and training of staff, towards achieving a full and permanent compliment of workers of a high calibre, so as to ensure a strong adoption service.

Significant progress has been made and due priority has successfully been given to safeguarding and child protection. However, challenges remain in recruitment of social workers and managers; this has been noted and its effect commented by adopters also. There is some variance in quality of assessments both relating to prospective adopters and to child permanence reports, as outlined above in this report.

Although managers are approachable and available, formal supervision of staff is not consistent. At times sessions have been postponed or cancelled to an extent that some staff consider that they do not receive enough guidance, support or critical evaluation of their day to day work. The instability of line-management in one of the teams has exacerbated this. The staff team is made up of people with a range of experiences and the issues regarding support, guidance and supervision are important ones to address.

Field social workers consider that they receive good management; however, shortage of resources impinge on their ability of delivering consistent good results on time in their adoption related tasks, particularly regarding life story work.

Consequently, the way staff are organised and supported does not always contribute to ensuring that those touched by adoption receive a strong service consistently. However, the progress the authority has made in a relatively short period of time is significant. This has been achieved by a skilled management appraisal of strengths

and weaknesses and commitment by all to continue to develop the adoption service, so as to provide positive outcomes for children through permanency. A senior service manager, who is experienced and qualified, has been in post for a number of years and she brings an informed and committed approach to adoption work. She has realistic short and longer-term plans in place to address the remaining challenges.

There is a team of enthusiastic administrative staff; in fact, a number of stakeholders have commented on how much they value their contribution to the work of the service.

Case records are generally well maintained, but the file audit system is not clearly formalised. There are written procedures relating to recording and access to records. Storage, including the archive arrangements, is generally appropriate. Although there are written risk assessments on the maintenance of the files, there is no evidence of a written disaster recovery plan in place and of a back-up system, such as electronically scanned records, to ensure that archived records are safeguarded.

The premises provide a comfortable, secure environment and are satisfactorily resourced. The service is moving to a different location in the near future.

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
7	provide counselling and all relevant information, so far as it is reasonably practicable, as soon as adoption is identified as a possible plan for the child. (The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, Regulation 14)	30/04/2009
13	notify in writing, if their whereabouts are known, the child's parents of the authority's decision about whether the child should be placed for adoption and of the fact that the child is to be placed for adoption. (The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, Regulations 19 and 33)	14/11/2008
21	ensure that there is an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff, receiving regular supervision and support, to meet the needs of the adoption agency. (The Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003, Regulation 10)	26/10/2008
29	provide evidence of a written disaster recovery plan and a back-up system to ensure that archived records are safeguarded.	31/03/2009

	(The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, Regulations 39)	
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Recommendations

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

- develop a more consistent, analytical approach to assessments (National Minimum Standard 4)
- review the health and safety checklist for prospective adopters. (National Minimum Standard 4)
- ensure that there is evidence of telephone verification of references (National Minimum Standard 19)
- ensure that lifestory work is carried out in a timely way in every case (National Minimum Standard 8)
- formalise the appointment of an adoption support services adviser (National Minimum Standard 34)