

# London Borough of Islington Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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<b>Unique reference number</b>	SC055709
<b>Inspection date</b>	13/11/2008
<b>Inspector</b>	Rosemary Chapman / Mike Stapley
<b>Type of inspection</b>	Key

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<b>Registered manager</b>	Lindsay Wright
<b>Responsible individual</b>	
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	15/11/2005

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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 team for the London Borough of Islington is based within the Children and Families division and currently has its office premises in Highbury Crescent. The agency provides a comprehensive adoption service in line with its statutory responsibilities. This includes matching and placing children in need of adoptive families; recruiting, preparing, assessing and approving adoptive families; providing assessments for, and a variety of, post adoption support to adoptive children and families; counselling and support to birth families; assistance and counselling to adopted adults who wish to see their birth records; intermediary services including tracing and reunions and assistance with indirect and direct contact arrangements. Inter-country assessments are usually carried out by a Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) on their behalf.

### 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 has a very clear understanding of the needs of children who require adoptive families and has undertaken an impressive amount of work to develop innovative ways of recruiting adopters, appropriate to the needs of Islington children, particularly within the black community. The preparation and assessment of adopters is thorough and this is supported by a robust adoption and permanence panel who give careful consideration to all their recommendations. Children are safeguarded and have their welfare promoted by committed staff with experience and knowledge of adoption.

Adopters receive a range of support to assist them in providing secure homes for children. This includes training, social work support, financial support and family therapy.

The agency is committed to promoting and maintaining a child's heritage through a robust approach to contact, whereby developing positive relationships with birth families through advice and assistance in supporting these arrangements.

The agency is well managed by experienced, knowledgeable, qualified and committed people. Good monitoring systems are in place, staff are supervised and have access to relevant training to provide an effective service.

There are areas which require some improvements; these relate to shortfalls in documentation and do not compromise the safety and security of children.

## **Improvements since the last inspection**

At the previous inspection, five actions and 24 recommendations were identified. The three actions in relation to Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checks and information on personnel files have been addressed, children's reports are now of a better and more consistent quality, there has been a risk assessment of the archive arrangements and a disaster recovery plan put in place although the latter is not specific to the adoption service however. The 24 recommendations have all been addressed.

The agency has improved its tracking systems for children to prevent drift, it has developed its systems to recruit adopters from a diverse range of people in the community and the adoption support service has become more established.

## **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 is very clear about the children for whom an adoptive family is needed and this knowledge underpins the recruitment strategy. Systems are in place which facilitate early referral to the adoption team, to enable them to target their resources appropriately. An impressive amount of work has been undertaken to look at innovative ways in which to attract people from the black community to consider adoption, particularly for young black male children, who are proven to be more difficult to place. There is a systematic approach to family finding, matching and tracking the progress of children referred for adoption and the 'hands on' involvement of the Assistant Director in chairing the adoption tracking meetings is indicative of the importance placed on ensuring children do not drift. There is clear evidence that every effort is made to place children with families who meet their cultural and religious needs, although the agency feel more could be done to formalise the assessment of sibling attachments.

The agency has a formal, comprehensive process for the preparation, assessment and approval of adoptive families. Enquirers are able to receive initial verbal information via a duty system, which is then supplemented by written information, attendance at an information evening and a preliminary interview, using a consistent format, with a social worker. These initial processes enable potential applicants to be fully informed about the adoption process, hear first hand the experiences of adoptive parents and also inform the agency of any potential issues which may need to be explored at an early stage.

Both the information evening and preparation training are said by adopters to be very useful: 'we didn't expect it to be so useful, we learned a lot and the teaching style was impressive'. The assessments analyse the suitability and competence of applicants in a thorough manner, midway reviews and second opinion visits are carried out routinely and all appropriate checks and references are undertaken. A health and safety check list is completed but it does not cover all the areas of risk which it could. Reports are of a good standard but diversity is not covered as thoroughly as it could be in terms of disability and other aspects of diversity; race and culture are routinely addressed well. There has been some delay in progressing the applications of potential adopters, many taking up to two years from initial enquiry to approval. The agency plans to improve the tracking of applications to prevent this happening in the future. Adopters spoke positively about their assessing social workers and their experience of Islington in the main: 'we were treated with care and consideration', 'our social worker was committed, sensitive and knowledgeable' although some expressed some dissatisfaction: 'our worker was inexperienced and there was a high staff turnover'.

There is a formal and robust matching process which ensures children are placed with the most suitable family, based on the assessed needs of the child. Adopters feel fully informed about the needs of the children with whom they are matched and commented that social workers do all they can to pursue missing information if a child from another local Authority is placed with them. The medical adviser is happy to meet with adopters to ensure they are fully informed of the implications of medical diagnoses and prognoses.

The adoption and permanence panel is properly constituted and the membership is varied in terms of personal and professional experience of adoption, childcare and ethnicity. Its operation is governed by comprehensive policies and procedures to ensure consistency of practice and function. There are good professional working relationships between the panel chair and the agency which facilitate constructive feedback regarding the quality of work presented to the panel. These mechanisms have proved effective and the panel chair reports that the agency has moved forward 'in leaps and bounds' in relation to the quality of written information presented to it and childcare practice. The panel is well chaired and adopter attendance both for approval and matches is well established. Adopters, although daunted by the thought of attending panel, describe the chair as 'brilliant' in putting them at ease, and the panel members as 'well-prepared', clearly having read the reports thoroughly. The observation of the panel confirms these comments.

The arrangements for the organisation of the panel are efficient, despite the lack of a permanent panel administrator until very recently and the minutes are thorough, although do not state the reason for the recommendation. The panel minute extract on the case file does not state who was at the panel so quoracy cannot easily be evidenced from individual extracts and siblings do not have an individual minute. The agency decision is made in a timely way after thorough consideration of all the paperwork. A written protocol in relation to the procedure to follow in the event of the decision maker being minded not to agree with the recommendation of panel is

being developed, along with an improved decision sheet so that the basis and reasons for the decision are documented clearly. The role is also used to monitor the standard of work coming to the panel and to improve practice.

The agency has a robust approach to the recruitment and selection of staff and appropriate safeguarding checks are carried out. Managers and staff are appropriately qualified and experienced professionals who are able to demonstrate knowledge, skill and understanding of the adoption task as well as commitment and sensitivity to their work with children and families. The safeguarding procedures relate to children placed for adoption, although the manager wants to further develop this, and staff have access to training, although some of the adoption team had not had recent safeguarding training.

### **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is good.

The agency provides good support to adoptive families both following a child's placement and post adoption order. This is achieved through regular visits and contact with the social worker during introductions and placement until the adoption order is made, when a family become the responsibility of the adoption support team. There is then a formal handover of responsibility to ensure that support needs are clearly identified. The team manager of the adoption support team sees all adoption support plans prior to their submission to the adoption panel, which provides a consistent approach and identifies resources which will be needed to support a child within the family.

The provision of adoption support has developed over the last three years. The agency provides training and workshops, in conjunction with the consortium, an annual summer social event and a 10 week behaviour management course. Social workers are undertaking Theraplay training to further enhance the support they can give to families. The adoption support team include a part-time family therapist who can provide either direct services or consultation and access to the Post Adoption Centre. There is a generous system of financial assistance available either through a regular adoption allowance or one-off payments for particular aspects, including loft conversions, and access to the advice of the Welfare Rights Unit to ensure families receive their correct entitlements. All these arrangements ensure that family life is maintained and supported to prevent adoption breakdowns.

The agency has access to medical and legal advice of a high standard. The medical adviser is described as 'excellent' and demonstrates a real commitment to adoptive children through her role as vice-chair of the adoption and permanence panel, her involvement in the preparation training for adopters and her willingness to obtain and explain medical information and the implications to adoptive parents during the matching process. The specialist legal advice which is available is also very helpful.

## Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency demonstrates a good and positive approach to, and understanding of, the lifelong implications of adoption, both for children and birth parents. This is evident through the involvement of birth parents in contributing to the information provided for a child and the maintenance of their heritage. The Child Permanence Reports (CPR) seen contain the birth parents' views about the proposed adoption of their child and staff expressed understanding and empathy towards them. An independent service is available to offer support and staff demonstrate an awareness of the importance of offering this at an early stage, whilst continuing to remind families of its existence if they choose not to take it up immediately. The CPRs seen are of a reasonable standard, however, social workers felt they would benefit from more guidance in this area. The adoption panel play an important role in ensuring these documents are fit for purpose, in conjunction with the managerial oversight given, and there is a very clear understanding that this is the document which an adopted adult will read in the future and thus must be appropriately worded.

The agency is committed to undertaking life story work and providing life story books for children in order to develop their understanding of what has happened to them and to maintain their heritage. Social workers demonstrate an awareness of the importance of gathering information at an early stage and their learning and understanding is reinforced through regular workshops. Life story books are of a good standard.

The child's heritage is maintained through direct and/or indirect contact with birth family members. The adoption support team are extremely committed to this work and offer a good service to adopters, children and birth families. Each child has an allocated worker to provide ownership and consistency to the support offered and enable good, working relationships to form and be maintained. There is evidence of sensitive work being undertaken with birth parents to help them write appropriate letters and thus engage in meaningful contact arrangements. Staff offer assistance with letter writing and follow-up broken agreements, but there is no automatic reminder system in place. Staff also engage in the minutiae of direct contacts to ensure everything runs smoothly and is a positive experience for everyone. The active involvement with contact arrangements aids the development of relationships with adoptive families and thus social workers are more able to provide direct assistance and advice when, for example, birth parents die, which has happened in a number of families. There was evidence that social workers attend funerals and write in detail about that experience, so a child has some knowledge and understanding when they are of an age to know more about it. When children reach 18 years of age, they are asked if they wish contact to continue but this is not formalised at present.

The agency offer a comprehensive service to adopted adults and birth relatives. This includes counselling, intermediary work, tracing and reunions. There is a waiting list for this service, which is prioritised and monitored by the manager. There is clear



evidence that good and sensitive work is carried out with all service users and their welfare is considered and promoted.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The work of the agency is clearly outlined in its Statement of Purpose and this is underpinned by comprehensive policies and procedures which give staff good, clear guidance about how to achieve the aims and objectives. There are two Children's Guides to adoption, one being more suitable for older children. The agency also has a range of resources which are appropriate for talking to young children about adoption to supplement the Children's Guide.

The information which is sent out to enquirers is of a very professional standard and gives clear information about the children who require adoptive families and the process which is undertaken. The approach is inclusive and welcoming to all sectors of the community. The information in relation to the smoking policy has not been updated in line with the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) guidelines, however, which clearly states that children under five years old should not be placed with people who smoke.

The agency is well managed by people who have a sound knowledge base, experience, relevant qualifications and commitment and there is a clear structure in place which gives clarity to the lines of accountability and responsibility. Staff feel well supported by their managers, through a system of regular and effective supervision and good communication. There are regular training opportunities, including access to external courses for specialist staff, however some staff felt that the training available was not as useful as it could be and wanted more opportunity to learn about adoption issues such as contact, attachment and writing reports.

The executive demonstrate a strong commitment to corporate parenting and understand the need to access the resources of the wider community to meet the needs of Islington children. They are kept informed about the work of the agency through briefings and regular reporting mechanisms.

The arrangements for administrative support have been compromised by the lack of permanent staff. This is being addressed and a more permanent staff group is being established.

There has been a recent reorganisation of the children's social work team and a reorganisation of the family placement service is also planned for the near future.

This has impacted on staff morale as the recent reorganisation has not fully 'bedded in' yet and there is uncertainty about the planned one. Despite that, staff were able to comment positively about the stable management in the Borough and many staff are long-serving, acknowledge that their caseloads are lower than some other Boroughs and that there are retention policies to encourage staff to stay.

The case records for adopters and children are well constructed and robust; they are indexed, information is easy to access and there is clear evidence of decisions made in supervision on the files. The storage of current records is secure but the archive arrangements are not as robust as they could be and a more specific disaster recovery plan which relates to the premises and records of the adoption service is not in place. The records in respect of staff contain the required information but those on panel members did not have clear evidence of telephone verification of references.

The premises used by the adoption service are identifiable but not accessible for staff who have certain mobility difficulties. Arrangements can be put into place for service users who need to access the building. This is being addressed through the provision of new premises which will meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The efforts to recruit a diverse range of adopters is impressive and innovative, the staff team is diverse and there is a strong approach throughout the council to promote inclusion.

## **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):

- ensure that diversity in all its forms is addressed in adopter assessments (NMS 4)
- develop the health and safety checklist so it is more comprehensive (NMS 4)
- ensure the minutes of the adoption panel state the reasons for the recommendation, address each sibling separately and the panel minute extract states the membership (NMS 12)
- ensure all staff have ongoing safeguarding training (NMS 32)
- update the smoking policy in line with the BAAF guidance (NMS 3)
- develop a disaster recovery plan which relates specifically to the premises and safeguarding/backup of the records of the adoption service (NMS 29)
- ensure there is clear evidence of the telephone verification of references for members of the adoption and permanence panel (NMS 28).