

London Borough Of Ealing Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Marian Denny / Lindy Latreille
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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 London Borough of Ealing's adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters. However, the service has commissioned the services of the Inter-country Adoption Centre to provide preparation training for applicants, who wish to adopt a child from overseas.

The service also carries out the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters. The support of adoption placements, as well as post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, which also includes birth records counselling and intermediary work. In addition, the service operates and maintains a letter box system, which supports information exchange in adoption placements. An independent counselling and support service is also provided to birth parents through commissioning arrangements with the Post Adoption Centre.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced inspection. All the Adoption National Minimum Standards (NMS) were addressed under the four outcome areas of staying safe, enjoying and achieving, positive contribution and organisation, which were judged as good.

Ealing's adoption service is extremely child focussed and has the child at the heart of its practice. It is thorough in its approach to the recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters and strives to ensure children are kept safe. Some improvement in the health and safety checklist though, would enhance this process. Considerable care and thought is given to the effective matching of children and adopters. However, the matching process is in danger of being compromised, unless children's permanence reports (CPR's) are improved.

A good range of in-house, multi-agency and external support services is provided to adopters, both pre and post order. This support is generally well thought out and provides families with the necessary, enabling support to maximise the chances of successful adoption placements.

The service fully recognises the lifelong implications of adoption and the importance of maintaining a child's heritage. Every effort is made to engage birth parents in the care planning process and enable them to contribute to their child's future. This greatly assists in ensuring children have a well recorded background. Ealing gives a high priority to life story work and makes every effort to ensure that both this work

and the life story book are completed in a timely manner. There is a robust and well managed letterbox system and assistance with letterbox contact is also available. Respect and equality is provided to all those involved in the adoption process and this is clearly demonstrated in the service's practice.

The service is managed effectively and efficiently. Both the management and staff team have considerable knowledge and experience in adoption and demonstrate a real enthusiasm and commitment to their work. However, quality assurance systems used by the service are not sufficiently robust, particularly in relation to panel members and agency records. These matters need to be addressed and have been brought to the attention of the service, through the actions and recommendations made in this report.

Improvements since the last inspection

Ealing's last full inspection was carried out in November 2005, which resulted in four actions and nine recommendations being made. Since this inspection, the service had made considerable efforts to address these matters, as a consequence, all the actions had been completed and only one recommendation remained outstanding. This recommendation related to telephone enquiries being made to verify the legitimacy of references.

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 London Borough of Ealing 's adoption service has an extremely good and effective recruitment strategy, which is based on an awareness of children requiring adoption. Its successful recruitment campaigns have resulted in a diverse range of adopters being recruited and resulted in more placement choice for children. Consequently, children from minority ethnic groups, dual heritage children, older children, sibling groups and children with disabilities have been effectively matched and placed with adoptive families.

There are clear processes and procedures to handle adoption enquiries and to follow up any expressions of interest. Adopters confirmed that they had received written information regarding the adoption process, which had been sent out 'promptly' and was 'extremely useful and easy to read'. Information meetings are held regularly; adopters were complimentary about the presentation and quality of the information provided.

The agency has a thorough preparation, assessment and approval process of

adopters, however applications are taken after preparation courses have commenced. Preparation training is tailored to meet the varying needs of adopters, for example, those wishing to adopt a child from overseas are able to access inter-country preparation training within the West London Consortium or from the Inter-country Adoption Centre. Materials used in the preparation training fit within a framework of equal opportunities and address anti-discriminatory practice. Both domestic and inter-country adopters spoke highly of the preparation training, stating that it was 'well organised' and the materials used 'well presented' and 'informative'. Staff were said to be 'welcoming', which resulted in a 'good' atmosphere developing in the groups and enabled those attending, to participate in group discussions more freely.

Adopters' assessments are driven by children's needs, in so far as they are well documented and generally of a good quality, for example, they are thorough, analytical and cover issues of parenting capacity and support networks well. However, in one assessment, the exploration of an issue of loss had not been clearly evidenced. The service carries out written references in relation to the adopters, employer references and checks with applicants' former partners. All necessary enquiries and statutory checks in relation to prospective adopters and other members of the household, who are aged 16 years or over are obtained. The service also 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, for example, it does not address window blind chords.

There is a system in place to monitor the timescales of adopters' assessments, which is working effectively. All adopters' assessments seen were carried out in legislative prescribed timescales. Adopters were positive about the assessment process, which they described as being carried out in a thorough manner. Staff were said to carry out their work in a 'professional', 'very knowledgeable' and 'skilled manner'. All adopters stated that their report was accurate and given to them in the required legislative timescale.

Adopters receive written information regarding the matching, introductory and placement processes. Information is also provided regarding the National Adoption Register. This information is reinforced to adopters through out the adoption process.

The adoption service is extremely child focussed and every effort is made to ensure children are matched with adopters, who best meet their assessed needs. Staff work hard to improve the quality of information provided for adopters and training has been provided regarding the CPR. However, despite this, the quality of the written information provided for adopters, has on occasions, been out of date and of variable quality, for example, the CPR. The London Borough of Ealing's matching process is enhanced though, through the robust activities of the adoption staff and the adoption panel. In addition, the services uses a variety of specialist advisers and services, who are able to meet with adopters and discuss specific issues relating to the child, with whom they are being matched. This provides adopters with the opportunity to fully consider the implications of such issues for themselves and their

family. The matching process is well documented and is extremely informative to any adoptee, who subsequently seeks to access their records. The introductions and placement of children with adopters are well managed and provide a good foundation for the stability of the adoption placement.

The adoption panel has a clear written set of policies and procedures which govern its function and operation. There is a well established practice of adopters being invited to attend the panel. The panel is appropriately constituted, arranged at a frequency that avoids any delay in considering the approval of prospective adopters, is well organised and chaired. Panel members are well prepared, make appropriate observations and ask relevant questions. Panel minutes are of good quality; in so far as they are informative, clearly state the panel's discussion, the reasons for the panel's conclusions and recommendations.

Adopters are invited to attend the adoption panel, with good preparatory work undertaken with them prior to their attendance. Adopters stated that both the chairperson and panel members 'welcomed' them and made 'real efforts to put them at ease'. This friendliness though, does not detract from the panel's thoroughness in considering matters before them. Adopters stated that the questions asked were 'relevant' and 'appropriate'.

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 always sent out within the necessary timescales.

The managers and all staff working within the adoption service are appropriately qualified, extremely experienced and skilled in their work. In the main, staff recruitment practices are robust, however, the system in place to verify written references by telephone, is not consistently managed.

The adoption service has a safeguarding policy and procedure, which contains all the required information under the adoption NMS and Regulations, though this document lacks clarity, in parts. A good recording system is in place to enable staff to record safeguarding issues effectively. 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 good.

Ealing fully recognises the importance of providing qualitative support to adopters in order to maintain stable and permanent homes for children. The service therefore ensures adopters retain their social worker following their approval. This arrangement continues throughout the matching, introductions, as well as the placement of children and at least, until the adoption order is made.

A full range of support services have also been developed, which are available to adopters through all stages of the adoption process. These support services are

provided in a variety of ways, for example, some services are provided directly; whilst others are provided in partnership with the local adoption consortium and an adoption support agency.

The support services provided directly by the agency include financial support packages, a regular news letter, an annual picnic and a monthly adopters support group. The service also has access to a therapeutic team, which consists of a clinical psychologist and an assistant clinical psychologist, who can, if required, offer consultation or undertake direct work with adoptive families. Staff in this team have participated in various training events for adopters. In addition to this, there are a number of other regular internal and external training events, which are available to adopters.

The adoption service has also developed good working relationships with other council services, which has resulted in adopters accessing a variety of specialist services, such as the behaviour and social inclusion team and the educational psychology service to meet specific educational needs. Similarly, there are good working relations with external agencies and services, for example, the children and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). This has ensured an effective system is in place for adopted children and their families to gain access to the CAMHS service, if necessary.

In addition to these support services, adopters are able to access the services provided by the local adoption consortium. Ealing has also commissioned the services of an adoption support agency. This agency provides a helpline, counselling services, as well as support groups and is available to all adopters and their children, who live in the area.

Ealing has also commissioned the Inter-Country Adoption Centre to provide a service to inter-country adopters, which also includes the provision of support services.

The adoption service's practice is extremely child focussed. This practice, together with the wide range of accessible, qualitative support services and effective matching of children with adopters, has undoubtedly contributed to the promotion of stable and successful adoption placements.

Adopters are made aware of the support services available at an early stage in their contact with the agency. Details of these services are made available on their website, adopters are also provided with written information. Adoption support plans are of a good standard and these plans are reviewed, where ever necessary. Any requests for support are responded to 'promptly', adopters state the support packages are 'well thought out', and 'good support is provided'. There is also a real confidence amongst adopters, who had not required support, that should such support be required in the future, it will be provided.

The adoption service has access to a variety of specialist advisers and written protocols are in place regarding their roles. The range of specialist services available increases the likelihood of adopters receiving appropriate support at all stages of the

adoption process. Staff indicated that the specialist advisers were committed to their work and provided a good service. A similar view was held by adopters, who had used their services.

The agency's practice is service user focused. Those using the service are carefully listened to and their wishes and feelings considered. The service fully consults and encourages service users to be involved in any decisions made, which affects their life. The agency ensures that the welfare and safety of the service user and others affected by the adoption are carefully considered, before deciding any service should be provided. Any adoption service commissioned by the agency is supported by a written agreement, which is regularly reviewed. This ensures the service provided is of the required qualitative standard and able to meet the needs of the agency and its service users.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Ealing's children and families service is committed to working with birth parents and encourages them to be as fully involved as possible in planning for their children's future. At times their cooperation is difficult to maintain, however, it is clear that every effort is made to overcome these difficulties and to engage birth parents in this care planning process. Views of birth parents are sought and recorded in child permanence reports. The service also invites birth parents to contribute to later life letters, so they can record their views for the child. In situations, where birth parents do not wish to engage in this process, the reasons for their decision are also recorded. This enables an adopted adult, who may wish to see their file in the future, a clearer understanding of their birth parents views regarding their adoption.

Once a match has been agreed, there is an opportunity for the birth and adoptive parents to meet. This enables adopters to receive information from the birth parents, first hand and can provide them with a firm basis for future contact arrangements. These meetings are prepared for carefully, sensitively handled and generally well managed.

Ealing has a contract with an adoption support agency to offer independent support and counselling to birth parents and families. There is written information regarding this service, which is provided at various stages of the adoption process. Real efforts are made to ensure support is provided to birth parents and their families at an early stage, for example, when an adoption plan is being considered for their child. Birth parents and their families can access the service at any time and the work is carried out in a thoughtful and sensitive manner. This contract is carefully monitored, to ensure that it provides a qualitative service and value for money.

Ealing has a commitment to gathering information about children's backgrounds and encouraging birth families to contribute to their child's heritage. They also recognise the importance of ensuring life story work is undertaken with a child and use such work to prepare a child for adoption.

Contact arrangements are well recorded. Direct contact is usually managed by the adopters; however, Ealing will provide adopters with support, where the arrangements are difficult or complex. Arrangements for indirect contact are managed through the letter box system. This is a robust system, which is managed in an effective and efficient manner. In addition to this, the agency provides a birth records counselling service, access to birth records and intermediary services. The experiences and learning derived from this work is used to inform the adoption service's practice.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The adoption service carries out its various tasks and responsibilities effectively and efficiently. Its statement of purpose is up-to-date and clearly details its aims, objectives and services provided. The statement of purpose is supported by a range of policies and procedures, which informs and underpins the operations and strategic direction of the agency.

The service's children's guides are in the form of information packs for children and can be produced in a variety of formats to meet children's differing needs. These packs are attractively presented, written in a child friendly form and contain all the required information.

Adopters are provided with well written, comprehensive information about the adoption process, which is sent out in a timely way. This literature is welcoming, attractively presented, does not discriminate and clearly reflects the service's practice. A system is in place to prioritise the assessment of prospective adopters, who are most likely to meet the needs of children waiting to be adopted and adopters are fully informed of this.

The management of the adoption service is undertaken by people who are appropriately qualified and have a sound background, as well as considerable knowledge and skills in adoption. They demonstrate a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities and are extremely committed to the service. Staff speak highly of them and indicate that the adoption service is effectively led and well managed.

There are a number of quality assurance systems in place to monitor the agency's performance, however, some of these systems require improvement. The Council is

committed to the adoption of children, which is seen as a positive choice for permanence. Reports on the management and outcomes of the adoption service are regularly provided, enabling the service's progress to be effectively monitored.

The service is fully staffed with a group of workers who are able to demonstrate significant knowledge, experience and skills in working with children and adoption in particular. They receive regular, good quality supervision and are encouraged and well supported in their work, by committed managers. Staff are clear about the structure of the service, its lines of accountability and communication. They also have a good understanding of their roles, responsibilities and who deputises, in the absence of their manager.

The management of the service's work is carried out in an efficient and equitable manner; with staff 's interests, knowledge, skills and expertise being used in determining its allocation. The administrative support provided is of a good standard, which enables staff to carry out their work effectively and efficiently.

The service gives a high priority to training. Staff are encouraged and enabled to take up any training and development opportunities provided, which they state are of a good standard.

There are appropriate policies and procedures in place for case recording. Case records are well organised, maintained and generally of good quality. However, not all records were legible and some records not signed.

The overall administration is efficient, well managed and appropriately structured to provide support to a busy agency. Administrative records are well maintained and stored in a confidential, secure manner.

Personnel files and panel members' files were well ordered and securely stored. However, not all panel members files contained the required information.

The premises are very well resourced. There is space, storage, good information technology equipment and communication systems. The premises are accessible and are fit for purpose.

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
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17	ensure robust quality assurance systems are implemented and maintained for all aspects of the adoption service (Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003, 7(a)(b))	01/04/2009
28	ensure all the required information relating to the adoption service's panel members are obtained (Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003, 11(3)(d)).	01/04/2009

Recommendations

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

- ensure the application for the assessment of adopters is completed prior to the preparation training (NMS 4)
- improve the health and safety checklist for prospective adopters (NMS 4)
- improve the quality of child permanence reports (NMS 5)
- ensure that the safeguarding policy and procedures makes specific and consistent reference to adopters.
- ensure telephone enquiries are made to verify references obtained for all personnel and panel members (NMS15).