

The London Borough of Barking & Dagenham 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 Barking and Dagenham's adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters. The service also undertakes the approval of non-agency adopters.

The service also carries out the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters; the support of adoption placements; post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, including 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 provided to birth parents through commissioning arrangements with an adoption support agency.

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.

The adoption service is child focussed and in the main, thorough in its approach to the recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters. However, some improvements in the assessments of adopters and in the health and safety checklist is required. This is also true in respect of the children's written assessments. However, the robust activities of the adoption staff, panel and specialist advisers ensure all necessary information is obtained. This assists the matching process and enables effective matching of children with adopters.

A range of support services to adopters is provided, both pre and post order, which is well thought out and ensures families are provided with the necessary support to maintain stable and permanent adoptive homes.

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. However, whilst life work is undertaken, this work is not always completed in a timely manner. There is a robust and well managed letterbox system and assistance with letterbox contact is available. A counselling and intermediary service is provided to adopted adults and birth relatives. All those affected by the adoption process are respected,

valued and receive an individually tailored service.

Both the management and staff team have considerable knowledge, experience and skills in adoption. However, the service's quality assurance systems are not sufficiently robust, particularly in relation to agency records.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last full inspection was carried out in August 2005, which resulted in 12 actions and 23 recommendations being made. In July 2006, a visit was made to the adoption service to follow up these actions and recommendations. The service had made considerable efforts to address these matters, with the result that one action and only six recommendations remained outstanding. This action related to recruitment practices and the recommendations to the telephone verification of written references, ensuring adoption panel policies and procedures met the NMS and Regulations, ensuring an action plan was completed in relation to health and safety checks and that the agency records were backed up and safely stored. There was also a recommendation made for the service's disaster recovery plan to be revised.

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 Barking and Dagenham's adoption service has a clearly written recruitment plan, which is based on an awareness of children requiring adoption. This plan is regularly evaluated to ensure its recruitment strategies are effective. However, the service also has a good reputation in the area and as a result receives a steady flow of enquiries from prospective adopters, which enables a diverse range of adopters to be recruited. This, together with the effective collaboration of local adoption consortium members and routine use of the national adoption register, ensures there is more placement choice for children. Children are matched with adopters who best meet their assessed needs, for example, there is evidence of consideration being given to the ethnic, cultural and religious needs in identifying the most appropriate placement. There is also a focus on placing children with their brothers and sisters, unless this will not meet their individual needs. Consequently, the service has been particularly successfully in placing large sibling groups. Older children and children with disabilities have also been effectively matched and placed with adoptive families. Children are being placed within twelve months of the decision that they should be placed for adoption.

Clear processes and procedures are in place to handle domestic and inter-country adoption enquiries. All adopters confirmed that they had received 'prompt', 'useful'

information regarding the adoption process, which had effectively met their needs. Information meetings are held regularly and adopters were complimentary about the presentation and the quality of information provided.

There is a formal process in place for the preparation, assessment and approval of adopters. Preparation training is held regularly, with materials used congruent with the agency's equal opportunities and anti-discriminatory practice guidance. The training is effective and ensures adopters are fully informed about the complexities of adoption and parenting a child from the care system.

Adopters confirmed this stating the training was 'well organised and presented', 'it was excellent', 'the training was invaluable'. A large number stated that they really enjoyed the experiential exercises, which were said to be 'thought provoking', 'really helped us understand the impact of life experiences, for example, loss', and several said, 'it was a real step forward in the adoption journey'.

Adopters' assessments are of a good standard, in so far as they are thorough, analytical and cover such issues as parenting capacity, life experiences, the impact of adoption and support networks well. Views of birth and adopted children are also obtained regarding their parents' decision to adopt. However, in one assessment there was insufficient exploration of an applicant's life experiences and likely impact on their parenting capacity. There was evidence that the service obtains 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 agency 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 the dangers of window blind chords or poisonous plants.

Adopters were positive about their experience of the assessment process, stating their assessments had been carried out by professional, skilled and sensitive staff. They also commented positively about the accuracy and realism of their written assessment, which they stated had been given 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 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 regarding the child permanence report (CPR) has been provided. Despite this, the CPRs are of variable quality, with some containing comprehensive information, whilst others lack such detail, for example, not all included the wishes and feelings of birth parents and family members regarding the adoption. In others, physical and personality

descriptions of parents are sometimes limited, even where the service knows them well. In some, contact arrangements are not always correct or clear. However, involvement of adoption staff, panel and specialist advisers in the matching process has ensured supplementary information is obtained. This has improved the matching process and ensured informed decisions are made when matching a child with adopters.

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 and arranged at a frequency that avoids any delay in considering the approval of prospective adopters. It is well organised and effectively chaired. Panel members are well prepared, make appropriate observations and ask relevant questions. Panel minutes are informative, clearly state the panel's discussion, with the reasons for the panel's conclusions and recommendations clearly recorded.

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 the 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 personally signed by the agency decision maker and always sent out within the necessary timescales.

The managers and staff of the agency are all appropriately qualified, very experienced and demonstrate impressive knowledge and understanding of adoption issues, legislation and current thinking. In the main, staff recruitment practices are robust, however, the system in place to verify written references by telephone is not consistently managed.

There is a safeguarding policy and procedure, which fully meets the adoption NMS and Regulations. A good recording system is in place to enable staff to record safeguarding issues effectively. All 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.

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

A full range of pre and post adoption support services have also been developed. These services are provided in a variety of ways, for example, some services are provided in-house, whilst others are provided in partnership with other services, such as the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).

These services include financial support packages, for example, settling -in grants and adoption allowances. There is a regular news letter, which informs adopters of the advice, help and support available to them. An annual social event takes place, which helps adopters and their children to socialise and keep in touch with each other. There is a buddy scheme in operation and there are adopters' support groups. Internal and external training is provided adopters. The service also employs a qualified play therapist, on a part time basis, to undertake direct work with children, including those with attachment difficulties. Guidance and assistance is available to adopters and children in writing letters, under letterbox agreements. The service will also offer support, if necessary, to facilitate contact arrangements between adopted children and their birth relatives.

Good working relationships exist between the adoption service and other Council services, which has resulted in adopters accessing a variety of specialist services, such as the looked after children's health and education services (LACHES). This service can provide assistance and support to adopters and their children in relation to specific health or educational needs. There is also an effective fast track system for adopted children to access CAMHS. The service will also, if necessary, spot purchase therapy packages from independent sources to support an adoptive family. In addition to these services, the agency can access a range of specialist advisers and services, including medical and legal advisors who are committed to achieving positive outcomes for children through adoption. Social workers and adopters were complimentary about their contacts with specialist advisors.

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. Written information is also provided adopters. Adoption support plans are of a good standard and these plans are reviewed, where ever necessary. Any requests for support are responded to 'promptly', with adopters stating the support packages were 'well thought out', and 'good support provided'. There was also a real confidence amongst adopters, who had not required support, that should such support be required in the future, it would be provided.

There are appropriate systems in place for people affected by adoption to receive specific services according to assessed need. These services are provided in a thoughtful, sensitive manner and people are fully involved in any decisions affecting their life.

The adoption service ensures any service commissioned by them, is supported by a written agreement. This agreement is regularly reviewed to ensure 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.

The adoption 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, however, these are not always recorded in the CPRs.

There is a contract in place with a voluntary adoption agency to offer independent support and counselling to birth parents and families. Written information regarding this service is provided at various stages of the adoption process and efforts are made to ensure support is provided at an early stage, for example, when an adoption plan is being considered for their child. The service is accessible to birth parents and their families 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.

The agency 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 work is undertaken with a child and use such work to prepare a child for adoption. However, such work, including the production of life story books, are not always carried out in a timely manner.

There are a limited number of direct contact arrangements, however, the service 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. Experiences and learning derived from this work is used to inform adoption practice.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good.

The agency is committed to providing a service that values and supports people's differences. This is underpinned by its policies and practice. Recruitment of adopters is prioritised to reflect needs of children awaiting adoptive placements. The agency

focuses on the specific needs of children when considering matches with adopters. Children's needs arising from their ethnicity, religion, culture or disability are carefully considered. Good support is provided for children who need therapeutic services. The agency is non-discriminatory in considering the suitability of people to adopt.

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 the 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 has two Children's Guides, which can be produced in a variety of formats to meet children's differing needs. They 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 those prospective adopters, who are most likely to meet the needs of children waiting to be adopted and this is effectively communicated to adopters.

The management of the adoption service is undertaken by people who are well qualified and have considerable knowledge, experience 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. Regular reports on the management and outcomes of the adoption service are provided, which enables the service's progress to be effectively monitored.

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

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 and enables staff to carry out their work effectively and efficiently.

The service gives a high priority to training. Staff are encouraged, as well as enabled to take up any training and development opportunities provided. Staff are very positive about the range of training and professional development opportunities provided, and state they are of a good standard.

There are appropriate policies and procedures in place for case recording. Case records are well organised and maintained. The majority contained full, up-to-date information, though not all records are dated and signed.

There is a clearly written policy and procedure in place for accessing records, which meet the legislative requirements and is strictly followed. The service ensures that separate records are kept for staff, and any allegations or complaints that are made. Administrative records are well maintained and stored in a confidential, secure manner. The overall administration is efficient, well managed and appropriately structured to provide support to a busy agency.

Personnel and panel members' files are well ordered and securely stored. Staff recruitment practices are in the main robust, the system in place to verify written references by telephone though is not consistently managed. Panel members' files contain all 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
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

Recommendations

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

- improve the health and safety checklist for prospective adopters (NMS 4)
- improve the quality of child permanence reports (NMS 5)
- ensure that there is evidence of telephone verification of references (NMS 19)
- ensure that life story work and the production of a life story book is carried out in a timely way (NMS 8).