

The London Borough of Havering Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Rossella Volpi / 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

Havering is a local authority covering an outer London area, with a growing demand for adoptive placements. The agency undertakes, or makes arrangements for, all statutory adoption work with children and those affected by adoption. This includes the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters and those who wish to adopt a child from abroad; family finding, matching and placement of children; support to placements both pre and post adoption order; post adoption support to adult adoptees, including intermediary work; post adoption support to relatives of adoptees and support to birth parents whose children will be or have been placed for adoption. The agency also manages direct and indirect contact arrangements. Havering is a member of the Partners in Adoption consortium, established to share resources, including adoptive families and training.

The adoption team is part of the family placement service. The team states its commitment to working in an anti-discriminatory way, within the overall service objective to ensure safe, secure and effective care that enables children to fulfil their potential, maximise their health and educational opportunities and live successful adult lives.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was a key, announced inspection, conducted over the course of one week by two inspectors.

Overall, children benefit from an authority that endeavours to match them with adopters who can meet their assessed needs, including those arising from ethnic and cultural background. Diversity and equality are addressed both in service delivery and in employment. The agency is thorough in its assessment of adopters. The skills and knowledge of the social workers, the professional conduct of the panel and the excellent decision making process contribute well to safeguarding. There is robust management. Elected members take a keen interest and are informed on adoption matters.

Adopters are well supported in providing stable and permanent homes. The agency recognises the life-long implications of adoption and provides birth parents, other relatives and adoptees with a range of support service; but steps to involve birth families at an early stage have not been effective. There are some other minor weaknesses relating to: child protection training; records; children's guide; support services.

Improvements since the last inspection

The inspection report of March 2005 lists eight statutory requirements and 11 good practice recommendations, which have been mostly addressed. The agency has taken effective steps to better promote diversity. Safeguarding and management have been made more robust with the following: improved procedures, strategies and documentation; training for staff; more comprehensive information for adopters; more timely assessments and decision making; sounder vetting of staff, panel members and adopters. However, some records of statutory checks do not always evidence all steps taken to assess suitability.

The Statement of Purpose and children's guide have been revised, but there is no guide suitable for younger children. The plans to better involve birth parents have not been effective in supporting them well at the initial stages of the adoption process.

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.

Effective and anti-discriminatory recruitment of suitable adopters, well considered permanency planning, a stable and qualified staff group and robust management contribute well to safeguarding. Therefore children, whose care plan is adoption, benefit from an agency which is child focused and committed to find early permanency solutions by matching them with suitable families.

Adopters receive relevant and comprehensive information about recruitment criteria and how the assessment and matching processes would be conducted.

There has been success in attracting some adopters from diverse cultural groups and lifestyles, following a review of the strategy in the consortium and of the way the information is provided. There has been some success, also, in placing older children, children with disabilities and sibling groups together, when that was deemed to be in their interest.

Adopters' assessments are generally conducted in a professional manner, address relevant issues, contain good analysis of the evidence and consider diversity and identity matters. Since recently, second opinion visits are completed routinely, by a manager. Statutory checks are pursued, but work histories do not always specify the months and therefore lack evidence that there are no unexplained gaps.

Adopters referred to the assessments as 'comprehensive and probing, but conducted with sensitivity and respect'. The significant number of adopters who come back to Havering to adopt again also shows that there is a good degree of satisfaction. Assessments of inter-country adopters are equally thorough and involve appropriate exploration of cultural matters.

Adopters and other stakeholders commented that the service has improved greatly in recent years and that now it is good. They quoted stability of staff and consistency in service delivery as important factors in achieving that.

There is much respect for the adoption team. For example, stakeholders referred to the team as: 'mature, consistent, cohesive and able to offer the necessary expertise to colleagues', thus contributing well to good outcomes for children. Adopters expressed strong praise for their assessing social worker and for the family finding process.

Adopters feel that they are well prepared for their task and they are helped in becoming aware of the special needs of children whose care plan is adoption. Preparation groups cover the relevant topics and adopters find them well managed and valuable. However, second time adopters, who are not invited to the group, commented that they lack a forum to refresh some of their training and make links with other adoptive families. The practice of taking the formal application after the preparation group has now ceased.

The agency has a strong approach to matching children with suitable families. Meetings with the agency medical adviser are offered to all adopters, to explore the physical or emotional health needs that the child might have and how these could impact on the family. There is excellent practice in formal care planning meetings. There is an early point of contact between the field social workers and the adoption team. There is good use of the expertise of a multi-professional group, for management to get early advice that the care plan for the child is appropriate and comprehensive.

The agency works closely with other authorities in the local consortium and has clear procedures for using the national adoption register. Such partnership aims to ensure that children whose care plan is adoption do not suffer from undue delays.

Field social workers have a lot of respect for the adoption team and very much value their contribution in ensuring that children are well matched to those who can meet their needs. For example, they referred to the adoption manager as 'the font of knowledge'. They said that they feel both supported and professionally challenged into giving matching deep thought, explore the basis of their decisions and the values underpinning them.

The information provided by children's social workers in permanence reports is sometimes of an uneven standard, mainly in relation to bringing the child to life; but they are generally good enough to enable panel to make recommendations about appropriate matching.

The adoption panel is scheduled at appropriate and regular intervals, so as to ensure that there are no delays in consideration of cases. The new chair has relevant expertise; there is a range of skills and backgrounds in the membership, although more representation from those who have been touched by adoption is being sought. The panel is governed by clear policies and business is conducted efficiently. Adopters are encouraged to attend and efforts are made to make them feel at ease. Social workers respect the diligence of the panel and the way it is conducted.

Decision making is thorough, giving proper consideration to all relevant information and having full sight of papers and panel minutes. It is set at a very senior management level, to ensure objectivity and proper scrutiny, but it retains a strong awareness of adoption issues. Thus it is an effective safeguarding tool. Timeliness of decision making has improved.

Elected members take a keen interest and the leader is well informed on adoption matters.

The recruitment and vetting of staff generally follow good practice in safeguarding children, by ensuring that those working for the adoption service are qualified, experienced and suitable. Not all required information is recorded on the individual files of panel members; however, this is being reviewed.

The agency has safeguarding procedures which relate to children who are placed for adoption and include allegations of historical abuse. Field staff are trained in the procedures, but adoption staff training has not been updated, although this is being addressed.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Adopters benefit from an agency that prepares them well and gives them appropriate information regarding the child coming to live with them. Consequently adoptive parents are well supported in providing stable and permanent homes; they are aware of the importance for the child's well-being to maintain a sense of their life before adoption.

The recent excellent initiative, to include adopted children in new services established to better support carers and schools with behaviour management, in relation to ensuring that children can progress in their education, has had good outcomes. For example, adopters commented on how great that work was and the difference it made to their ability to maintain stability of placement.

Health needs are explored and this enables adopters to be aware of their implications on the whole family. However, the temporary arrangements in place to cover for the absence of the permanent medical advisor do not extend to attending panel. This is an issue for panel, although written advice is provided. Detailed written

legal counsel is prepared for panel meetings, in addition to attendance. Stakeholders consider this and also the general guidance from the panel advisor, to be excellent.

A recent service agreement with a specialist external agency enables the adoption team and adopters to receive counsel on complex matters and on devising strategies for interventions. Child care teams receive clinical supervision through arrangements with the child mental health service.

Across the consortium there are groups for adopters and fun days. Adopters have commented positively about the range of social events arranged and the opportunity these offer the whole family to meet with other adoptive families.

The effective joint working between the adoption and the child care teams has achieved good outcomes for children and adopters. There is sharing of specialist knowledge and experience, usually prompt response to new information or difficulties in placement and well planned support for families.

Overall, people affected by adoption receive a service that is tailored to their particular needs. Efforts are made to ascertain their wishes and feelings and they are informed of their right to complain. There are some anxieties in the team that the growth in the range of work has caused some areas of adoption support to be less well resourced and about the implications if this is not appropriately addressed.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

Havering recognises the life-long implications of adoption and the importance for adopted children to maintain a sense of their heritage.

The agency states its commitment to provide people affected by adoption with quality services that are delivered in a fair, open and respectful manner; to continue to develop new ways of reaching out to service users so as to learn from their experiences and make changes to services where required.

The authority has developed a clear strategy for working with and supporting birth parents and families throughout the whole process. Havering makes much use of the experience and skills available within the adoption service to help parents engage to some extent. There is also an agreement with an external agency to provide independent counselling and support to birth families and reciprocal agreements with partners on the consortium.

There is evidence of some good and sensitive work. The birth parents seen were able to reflect that what happened was the best outcome for their child. Birth parents are notified of all relevant decisions, regarding the adoption. Birth parents are offered opportunities to have their voice heard and their views are considered and recorded. Whenever possible birth family members are invited to meet the adopters and are provided with some anonymised information about them. However,

the stage at which birth parent counselling commences and when they engage is too late. The service is not proactive enough as soon as adoption has been identified as a plan for the child. Uptake of what is available is minimal. This means that birth families do not benefit from services that effectively support their involvement at a key time in the adoption process.

There is lack of clarity from field social workers about what is available for birth parents pre-adoption and from both field and adoption teams about information leaflets and who should give them to birth parents.

There is also an issue about location brought up by birth parents, in that Havering lacks appropriate premises for meeting with them. One of the examples that birth parents mentioned is that the place used for the newly established group is the same venue used for contacts.

Birth families are supported to contribute to the compilation of the child's permanence reports and life story work and are informed of the reasons why this is intended to benefit the child. The authority is taking steps, through training and direct support by the panel advisor, to enable such work to be consistently timely and of a good standard.

No back up has been made of the life story books, although some of the information contained in them is irreplaceable.

There is a letterbox system for indirect contact with birth families, which is conducted by an experienced social worker. The birth families seen expressed much satisfaction with the arrangements and the help they receive to enable such exchanges. The recent appointment of administrative support has enabled reminder systems to be established, so as to avoid the anxiety occasionally caused to some birth families, when their letters have been delayed. There is no prompt follow up of direct contacts supervised by foster carers.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Those touched by adoption are informed of what to expect from the service because there is a comprehensive document that describes what the agency is set to provide and there is a children's guide to adoption. However, there is no guide suitable for younger children.

The work of the agency is underpinned by clear policies and procedures. The agency

emphasises its anti-discriminatory approach in its work with potential adopters, whilst maintaining the principle of only assessing families who can meet the needs of children waiting for placement.

There has been significant progress, in the last three years, in addressing previously identified shortfalls and in establishing stable teams. The agency is well managed and staffed with appropriately qualified workers, who convey a strong commitment to suitable permanent placements for children. This enables the continuation of such agenda of improvement and supports the more recent initiatives to become established and effective. The corporate parenting role is being strengthened, with elected members taking a more direct approach.

Overall, service users benefit from a reflective organisation with a good understanding of its strengths and weaknesses, learning from experience and able to progress.

There are some weaknesses remaining. Most of those have already been recognised by the agency and there are plans to address them, although some, such as engaging birth parents at an earlier stage, for example, require longer term investment.

Files are periodically audited, kept securely and with due regard for confidentiality. It is at times difficult to find the relevant documents and it is not always clear what information is actually meant to be there.

Staff like working for Havering, which they consider to be a competent and fair employer. They receive good quality supervision and periodic appraisals, linked to training needs. Managers are well respected, accessible and have created a culture where staff feel safe to raise issues.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. This is mainly discussed in the body of the report, under the specific outcome areas. Individual needs are addressed in training, assessments and matching. Attention is given to the ability of adopters to promote a positive identity for children, value different abilities, maintain heritage and meet cultural needs. Prospective service users are welcomed without prejudice and staff are supported when they encounter discrimination in their work.

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, information and ascertain birth parents' wishes, 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 13)	03/08/2009

Recommendations

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

- ensure that child protection training is updated for all those working for the purpose of adoption. (NMS 33)
- ensure that the additional responsibilities of adoption support workers do not adversely impact on the quality of the service provided. (NMS 6)
- monitor that all appropriate steps are taken in the work relating to contact with birth families and maintenance of children's heritage. (NMS 9)
- compile a children's guide to adoption suitable for younger children (NMS 1)
- develop effective monitoring systems to ensure that records retain evidence that all required checks have been satisfactorily completed for staff and adopters and that files are well organised. (NMS 17)