

Haringey Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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| Inspector | Sean White / Rosemary Dancer |
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| Setting address | London Borough of Haringey Social Services, 40 Cumberland Road, LONDON, N22 7SG |
| Telephone number | 020 8489 3635 |
| Email | |
| Registered person | London Borough of Haringey |
| Registered manager | Rachel Elizabeth Clare Oakley |
| Responsible individual | |
| Date of last inspection | 31/10/2005 |

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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

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|---------------|---|
| 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

This is a statutory local authority adoption service. It provides, or makes arrangements for, all matters relating to the adoption of children and support services for anyone affected by adoption. This includes the recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters, and the matching and placement of children with suitable families. Support services are provided or commissioned to support placements before and after adoption, birth parents and adopted adults; this includes birth records counselling and intermediary work.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

The service has a sound approach to meeting the needs of children placed for adoption. It achieves this through a thorough approach to the recruitment of suitable adopters, which is supported by skilled workers and team managers, and a robust adoption panel. There is a keen focus on meeting the complex racial and cultural needs of children through careful matching, and placements are well supported to enable a positive and optimistic future to be realised.

Despite radical changes in the senior management structure, team managers maintain a strong operational and strategic direction that encourages the development of both the agency and workers. The workers have clear responsibilities, are well supported and operate in a structured system that enables and encourages good quality work. Some aspects of operational quality are sometimes inconsistent, however, particularly in respect of the detail of permanence reports and the timeliness of life books.

Whilst thorough in most instances, the agency does not have a completely robust system of recruiting workers and managers. Inconsistencies in recruitment from employment agencies could leave the service compromised through lack of detailed information about applicants' antecedents. This issue is the most important for the agency.

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency has made improvements in many areas, this includes a more efficient approach to managing and organising panel business and the arrangements for case recording. Some issues are not as improved, however, and there still remains some inconsistencies in respect of children's permanence reports and the information available to prospective adopters.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency has a well developed approach, determined by up to date procedures, to recruiting suitable people to be adoptive parents. Recruitment activity is based upon the needs of children requiring placements, many of whom have complex backgrounds and circumstances, which ensures that the child's needs are matched with families that are able to meet them. The agency is successful in this area and has had very few disruptions in recent times.

The exchange of information about children is managed in a suitably efficient manner, with all necessary and required details, histories and circumstances made available to prospective families for them to make informed decisions. However, there has been in recent times some inconsistencies in the quality and detail in children's permanence reports that has led to concerns in the adoption panel and prospective adopters not being fully informed of children's circumstances.

There is a thorough and well managed approach to the preparation and assessment of adopters, directed by clear procedures and guidance. Prospective adopters undertake their training through a well established model; these groups run regularly throughout the year. There is also the opportunity for prioritisation and fast-tracking by sharing preparation facilities with other local adoption agencies when this appears appropriate or necessary. This enables the service to prepare and assess people that may be able to offer a placement for a particularly complex set of needs. The process for people wishing to adopt is rigorous throughout and undertaken with children's needs being the driving force; the approach is underpinned by a well established understanding of diversity issues that informs practice in all areas. Formal applications to adopt are invited after people have undertaken their preparation training, not, as regulations require, before; applicants do not, therefore, have the full protection of access to representation until after the process has started.

The thoroughness of approach is maintained by the adoption panel and the agency's decisions are made in an equally robust manner, and in a timely way. The panel is well managed, efficiently organised and administered, and always meets as a quorum. Business is conducted with integrity and with a clear focus on making sound recommendations based on the information presented to it. The reports that are presented for the panel to consider are, in the main, of a good standard; there have been, however, some inconsistencies in the quality of children's permanence reports in recent times.

The managers and workers in the agency are all suitably qualified and experienced, and demonstrate a deep understanding of children's social work and adoption matters. They operate with professional integrity, demonstrate insight and sensitivity, and attract plaudits from service users.

There are problems, however, in the way that appointments are made. Whilst the recruitment practices of the agency are well established in most instances, notably those undertaken through the Human Resources department, appointing workers and managers from employment agencies is not as rigorous. This has led to inconsistencies in employment practices that could compromise the authority's recruitment procedures.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

There is a strong approach to supporting adoptive placements. The agency has canvassed families in order to determine service users' views on the support they need, or might need, and adjusted its services accordingly. This enables the agency and families to work in partnership when identifying the kind of input or resources required to support placements.

There is a range of support facilities and resources that the agency provides or to which it has access; there are also services commissioned to meet situations where there are complex needs. The service, through a discretely managed team, is able to identify the needs of families by engaging with them throughout the adoption process. This enables a clear understanding of circumstances to be realised and suitable packages to be negotiated and resourced. This can be as simple as providing baby sitting or respite on the one hand, to sophisticated, multi-agency input on the other.

The service is well served by specialist advisors, who bring a strength of understanding to complex issues and circumstances. Medical, legal and psychological advice is available at every panel and the agency has good access to advisors to enable it to be fully informed in these areas; this informs practice and provides sound underpinning to the adoption process across the board.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency demonstrates a clear commitment to working with birth parents in order that children can understand their backgrounds and histories. Wherever possible

birth parents are invited to be part of the planning for their children's futures and are encouraged to express their views and wishes. Where there are difficulties engaging with, and in some instances locating, birth parents the agency works impressively hard to locate as much information, about them and from them, as possible.

Although it is clear that the agency has a strong commitment to undertaking life-story work and producing life-books and other information for children and their adoptive families, it struggles to maintain a consistent approach in this area. Life-books do not always follow the child at the time of placement and, although most children will have one at the time their adoption is finalised, timeliness is somewhat variable.

There is a range of opportunities for birth parents to locate support and the agency encourages and refers them to independent agencies that have the skills and expertise to provide appropriate services.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The agency has a clear statement of purpose that outlines its aims and objectives, and how it achieves them; it is underpinned and informed by sound operation policies and procedures. The information produced for potential adopters is comprehensive and provides a clear and unequivocal outline of the adoption process and what can be expected from an application made to the authority.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. There is a clear understanding throughout the service of issues surrounding difference and this was evident throughout practice and strategic management. Particularly strong is the service's approach to meeting the cultural and heritage needs of children placed for adoption.

The people involved in the management of the adoption service are very experienced and skilled professionals; it is a stable management group and demonstrates knowledge and understanding of all matters relating to the adoption of children. However, there has been a radical change in the senior management of the agency in recent times and this has placed strains on the support systems available throughout the organisation, although it is evident that all efforts are being made to embed the new arrangements as quickly as possible. The recruitment to a temporary management post in the service was not undertaken with all due rigour, particularly in respect of the way in which the service arranged the appointment with an

employment agency. There is a more formal approach to the management of recruitment when the human resources department are involved than when arrangements are made through an employment agency.

Nevertheless, the service, at operational level undertakes its responsibilities in an efficient and well ordered way and the development of strategic initiatives continue. The allocation and management of workload is well organised and workers enjoy a supportive and enabling environment. The administration of the service is well managed and efficient with clear procedures and protocols providing a solid framework within which the workers and managers can undertake their responsibilities.

The executive is kept informed of the activities of the service and, although there is a new, inexperienced leader for children's services, it is evident that every effort is being made to become familiar with adoption matters.

The staff team is, in the main, well established and has a reasonably low turnover. The systems used to allocate and prioritise workloads are equitable and promote an efficient approach to undertaking responsibilities well, within the staffing resources available - which are sufficient. Training resources are generous and there is a range of relevant development opportunities available to staff. Specialist training enables the service to maintain a contemporary knowledge of developments and thinking in adoption issues.

Case recording is of a good standard; it is maintained electronically and there is skilled administrative input to enable workers to use the system effectively. Administrative procedures and practices overall are of a good standard. Procedures in respect of sharing information are robust and meet the needs of confidentiality and data protection. Archives are kept securely and have some protection from damage, there is also an effective system in place for monitoring and tracking access. They are not, however, copied in any form and their location could be prone to a risk of fire. This has not been subject to a risk assessment and the disaster recovery plan only addresses electronically held data. This could compromise the overall safety of older, original records and documents.

Personnel and panel members' records are inconsistently maintained. Workers' records kept by the Human Resources Section are of a good standard and include all required information. However, those in respect of staff recruited through employment agencies are less well managed and do not include all information in all cases.

The premises used by the service are located in an accessible area of the borough. They are reasonably well equipped and provide for a comfortable working environment.

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 |
|------|--|------------|
| 5 | prepare children's permanence reports in a full and complete way to ensure the adoption panel and prospective adopters have all the information needed to make recommendations and effect sound matching in every case (Reg. 17 & 31 The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005) | 01/05/2009 |
| 4 | invite applications from prospective adopters before they undertake preparation training (Reg. 22 The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005) | 01/05/2009 |
| 15 | ensure recruitment procedures for all managers and staff, particularly those applicants from employment agencies, are thorough in all cases (Reg. 6 The Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003) | 01/05/2009 |

Recommendations

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

- prepare children's life-story books in a timely way (NMS 8)
- include details of how to contact the Children's Rights Director in the children's guide (NMS 1)