

Westminster City Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Mike Stapley / Stephanie Omosewerha
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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 agency of the City of Westminster known as 'The New Families Team' operates all the statutory duties it carries responsibility for under current legislation. This includes: the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters; the matching and placement of children with suitable families; support to people who have been affected by adoption.

The service operates from accessible premises in Frampton Street, London, NW8.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This inspection was a full, announced inspection, carried out by two inspectors over a period of four days. Key personnel were interviewed, documentary evidence was read and service users interviewed and surveyed for their views of the service.

The adoption agency provides a good, sound service to children, birth parents, adopted adults and adopters. The recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters is extremely thorough and the adoption panel provides robust scrutiny of approvals and matches. Matching of children is well thought out and systems are in place to prevent drift. All staff are subject to sound recruitment and selection procedures. However at the time of the inspection the preparation for adopters was taking place prior to completion of the application form. The agency will need to ensure and demonstrate that all prospective adopters complete the application prior to commencement of the preparation groups to ensure compliance with regulation.

Adoptive families are well supported, both financially and by the creative use of Westminster's own and other services. Birth families and adopted adults also receive a sensitive and supportive service from committed professionals. Birth families are, wherever possible involved in planning for their children and their contribution is valued and recorded. Life story work is given a high priority and children's heritage is promoted through a robust letterbox system.

The agency is well managed, both structurally and operationally, by committed, experienced, knowledgeable managers. Good monitoring is in place both from the Executive side of the Council and the managers; staff are well supported, supervised and receive good training to enable them to provide a high quality service.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last social care inspection of the adoption service, in 2007, resulted in two statutory requirements. The first related to the storage of historic adoption records and the second to the content of files for staff and adoption panel members. The agency devised a management 'action plan' and has acted upon both of these requirements although it is acknowledged that it is not always possible to correct gaps in historical documentation.

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 demonstrates a good awareness of the children who require adoptive families, which enables it to undertake appropriate recruitment activity. There is a clear, written recruitment strategy which details a number of methods used to attract potential adopters. There are formalised procedures to ensure that any child who may require an adoptive family is referred to the adoption team in a timely way, good monitoring processes are in place to prevent drift and the evidence shows that children are placed without undue delay. Social workers commented that there is a sense of urgency to progress children's plans and family finding is a priority. Children who are of an age to express their views have those taken into account. The needs of children are highlighted through a formalised meeting with the child's social worker and the family finder, and appropriate consideration is given to placing children with their siblings and with a family who meet their cultural, ethnic and religious needs.

The recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters is a well thought out and comprehensive process. The adoption team hold information evenings twice a year, which give enquirers the opportunity to meet the team and ask any questions. This is then followed up by an initial home visit by a social worker from the New Families Team. If the enquirers' interest is accepted, they are invited on to the next preparation training course. Formal applications are not taken up until after the Preparation training has been completed. In the majority of cases, the agency has found that this has given people more opportunity for reflection on the process and the ultimate decision as to whether to proceed. However the regulations do state that the written application must be completed prior to the preparation training. The preparation training is thorough and adopters say it is very useful. The agency undertakes robust checks including former partners, employers and other local authorities. There is also a comprehensive health and safety checklist which has recently been reviewed to include areas such as guns, weapons and poisonous plants. This process ensures as far as possible that the adoptive parents are

appropriately safe to care for children.

Assessments are analytical and competency-based; to ensure potential adopters have the appropriate parenting skills and resilience to meet the challenges of the adoption task. The midway review system is extremely good practice and a very effective means of teasing out any issues relating to the assessment. It is focussed, documented and presented to the adoption panel as part of the assessment. Adopters described their assessing social workers as 'really brilliant' and 'organised, excellent and sensitive'.

The agency has a good, well thought out, formalised process for the matching, linking and introduction of children to their adoptive family. Adopters are given clear information about this process, and are made aware of the National Adoption Register and the West London Consortium arrangements. Adopters confirmed they received sufficient information to enable them to make an informed decision about whether the proposed placement was right for them and had the opportunity to meet foster carers, the medical adviser and any other relevant person. Once a placement is agreed, adopters sign a placement undertaking which outlines their duties and responsibilities to the child and the agency.

The agency has a comprehensive set of policies and procedures which relate to the operation of the adoption panel. Adopters are invited to attend the panel, both for their approval and for matching, and are given information both verbally and in writing, to ensure they know what to expect. Adopters confirmed that they were made welcome and listened to.

The panel is appropriately constituted with a range of members who offer a variety of skills and experience. The recruitment checks are appropriate, there is evidence that they observe the panel prior to commencing as a voting member, undertake an induction and have ongoing training. The panel meets regularly, with the facility to hold extra panels if necessary, and there is no evidence that children's plans are delayed through the inability to obtain a panel date. They are well-administered, papers are sent out in good time to enable panel members to read them and be prepared, and the minutes are full and reflect the discussion and the reasons.

The agency decision maker takes his role seriously and has access to all the information to enable him to make his decision in a considered manner. The decision is made within the necessary timescales and letters to adopters and birth parents are appropriately worded and sent out in a timely way.

All the staff and the nominated manager have up to date Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks and are appropriately qualified and experienced. They have access to a range of relevant training and are suitable to work with children and families.

The safeguarding procedures make specific reference to children placed for adoption and staff are trained in these procedures on an ongoing basis. This promotes a workforce which is safe and suitable to provide a strong adoption service to children and families.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The agency has a well-planned, strong and committed approach to supporting its adopters, both before and after an adoption order is made. This process starts during their preparation for approval, and once approved, adopters describe their social workers as very easy to contact and extremely supportive. Systems are in place to enable approved adopters to develop their knowledge and understanding of the adoption task, through the adoption team, workshops and support groups. In addition adopters are encouraged to attend social and educational events held within the consortium. Some adopted Westminster children have also taken part in the Puppet Workshops run by After Adoption.

The agency are planning to hold events for adopters at least on an annual basis, such as a picnic to enable adopters and children to come together for a fun day. This will hopefully help to promote links between adopters and children for further support and enjoyment.

There is a systematic approach to analysing the support needs of adopters and the issues they may experience and the support packages which may need to be put into place.

The agency provides excellent financial support packages to its adopters to enable placements to be made and to continue. This includes ongoing financial support for children with particular needs. The agency will in certain circumstances offer financial support to enable adopters to build an extension to their house. Adoption Support plans clearly identify a child's educational needs and the type of education provision that would best meet the child's needs, including any financial support that is required to meet such needs. Overseas adopters are offered an equally supportive service. Preparations and ongoing support as necessary is provided by the agency's Inter-country adoption social worker. In addition overseas adopters are also referred to the inter-country adoption centre for more specialist advice and support.

Children placed for adoption receive a good service from the Child Adolescent and Mental Health Services team (CAMHS), which has a multi-disciplinary team, including specialist workers, for looked after children. This team can provide a prompt response to referrals they receive, works in partnership with social workers in both the adoption team and the children's teams and provide consultation to adopters and staff. Adopters commented that they worked well together and felt it was a 'joined up' service.

Legal and medical advice is of a good standard. The legal adviser specialises in adoption and gives useful updates to staff and the adoption panel on case law. Both these advisers are an invaluable asset to the overall processes of adoption and adoption support.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The agency shows a commitment to the lifelong implications of adoption for the birth family, which is acted upon in practice. Birth parents are involved in contributing to the planning for their children and consulted about their wishes and feelings. Where possible, these are recorded on the Child Permanence Report (CPR). Children's views are also sought where appropriate and recorded on the CPR. Birth parents are offered the opportunity to access support from After Adoption from the time that adoption is identified as the plan for the child. The agency makes considerable efforts to engage with birth fathers and has in the past used DNA testing to establish a birth father's identity.

All children placed for adoption have a life story book which their adoptive parents can go through with them at age appropriate levels throughout their lives to help them to understand their history. Children who of an appropriate age and understanding are also encouraged to contribute towards their life story book. Birth parents and other family members, where appropriate are encouraged to contribute to their child's life story book and write letters that can be shared with the child at an appropriate time.

The agency provides life story book training and has a range of age appropriate books, toys and activities for direct work with children. Cameras and laptops are available for use with children. In addition the agency will commission support for complex life story work. The Independent Reviewing Officers monitor life story books at the children's statutory case reviews to ensure that they are not only complete but are of a high quality.

There is a robust letterbox system in place which is currently managed on a contract by a Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA). There is evidence to show that the agency provide a very effective service for birth parents. The agency ensures all contacts are acknowledged and copied and assistance is given with letter writing, which includes written guidance and practical help. In addition the agency can support birth parents if they receive letters that cause difficulty by offering help and advice. The contract is monitored on a quarterly basis by the service manager. The agency co-ordinates direct contact between adopted children and their birth families where this is part of the adoption support plan and there was evidence of very sensitive work with birth parents, children and adopters in relation to this. In addition the agency offer adopters the opportunity to meet with birth parents if appropriate and if it will not jeopardise the adoptive placement. Adopters have found this to be helpful as it assists in talking to the child about their birth parents as they grow up.

The agency also demonstrates their commitment to adopted adults. There are numerous leaflets which give advice and guidance on how to initiate contact with adopted relatives and information on tracing. In addition there is a great deal of information on the agency's website for adopted adults. The agency offers a birth records counselling service to adopted adults who live in Westminster who want

information about their birth family. One member of the adoption team is mainly involved in this work, which is carried out with great sensitivity. The agency does not offer intermediary services; it signposts those in need of such a service to external agencies such as the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) or NORCAP.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The Statement of Purpose is comprehensive, informative and easy to read, and taken in conjunction with the underpinning policies and procedures, provides a clear framework and direction for the operation of the agency. The Children's Guide, given in conjunction with the complaints leaflet, meets the requirements of the regulations. All documents can be translated into other languages and this is made clear. Applicants receive good, clear written information at various stages of the process which enables them to be aware of what should happen next. Adopters commented that this was useful and they were clear about the children who need adoptive families. They report that Westminster is very welcoming and has a good understanding of diversity issues.

The agency is well managed at all levels. There is an effective, strategic approach to improving outcomes for children which is supported by the operational activities. The management team have appropriate skills, qualifications, knowledge and experience and this is backed up by enthusiasm and commitment to the work of the agency and outcomes for children. There are clear lines of accountability and good communication, both between the management team and the staff group. The executive is committed and kept informed of the agency's activities through written reports and monitoring systems. These mechanisms ensure there is good and effective scrutiny of the service.

The agency has an appropriate number and range of staff to enable the service to run according to its statement of purpose. Staff demonstrate significant levels of knowledge, skill and experience of working with children and in adoption. They are well supported in their work through regular supervision and support to undertake training.

There are sufficient administrative staff to support the work of the service; other staff commented that they were 'invaluable' and 'fantastic'. Their skills are well utilised to provide a good quality of written and other materials and they are part of the team.

Staff state that Westminster is a good place to work, being child-focused and supportive, and many staff, particularly those at a senior level have worked for the authority for a number of years. The turnover of staff is very low and efforts are made to retain staff through various means including flexible working arrangements.

All staff receive regular and effective supervision from their managers. The new families team have good peer support and opportunities for external consultation when they are undertaking specialised pieces of work for complex cases, which shows a commitment to supporting staff and to ensuring work is carried out to a good, professional standard. Training needs are highlighted through the appraisal system and access to training is good. External training can be more difficult to access because of the cost, but the manager is committed to supporting her staff in accessing this where possible.

Case records on adopters and children are reasonably well organised and allow relatively easy access to information, as they are indexed and provide basic information at the front. Records are for the most part signed, dated and legible and there is evidence of decisions signed off by management. However it is evident that files need to be monitored in a more robust and efficient manner as it was difficult to evidence certain documentation. In addition several documents were not signed or dated which makes it difficult to track timescales. Comprehensive policies and procedures are in place which detail the expectations of recording, security arrangements, confidentiality and access to records. Personnel files are extremely well organised and demonstrate a rigorous approach to the recruitment and selection of staff, including a very clear system for the recording of telephone verification of references, which is consistently implemented. Panel members' files are similarly well organised and contain all the required information.

The premises are appropriate for the needs of the service and are identifiable and accessible to the public. The IT systems are secure and there is a good business continuity plan in place. Adoption records are archived within storage facilities designed to keep the most sensitive data and documents safe and protected from environmental risks.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The efforts to recruit a diverse range of adopters is impressive and creative wherever possible, the staff team is seen to promote diversity and there is a strong approach throughout the authority 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):

- take the written application to be assessed as an adopter prior to preparation training. (NMS 4)
- develop a more formalised approach to file audits to ensure shortfalls are rectified and addressed. (NMS 27)