

Bromley London Borough Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

Unique reference number	SC054048
Inspection date	14/08/2009
Inspector	Margaret Lynes / Lindy Latreille
Type of inspection	Key

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Date of last inspection	26/06/2006

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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 Bromley adoption team, based within the social care division of Children and Young People Services, provides a borough wide service. It is responsible for all the adoption work undertaken within the department. This includes domestic, inter-country and step-parent adoption; birth parent counselling; post placement and post adoption support and intermediary services.

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 at which all key standards were inspected. This is a good service, and one in which the commitment of staff to good outcomes for children is clearly evident. This inspection has resulted in eight recommendations. These relate to the date the agency takes the application; the length of time the assessment process takes; the timeliness of the decision post panel; safeguarding training; record keeping; recruitment files; storage of archives and policies and procedures. The inter-country aspect of this service was not inspected on this occasion.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last inspection report contained three actions and 11 recommendations. The actions all related to the panel - its remit for making recommendations; the clarity of its constitution and membership; and the vetting of panel members. The authority has taken action with regard to all of these, however one recommendation has been raised in this report regarding the information contained in the recruitment files for panel members.

The recommendations related to the distribution of panel papers; life story work; delegated management responsibilities; administrative resources; the consistency of the service provided; staffing levels - particularly in adoption support; a disparity in social workers' salaries; better management of case recording; a more coherent file management system; personnel files and access to and quality of office facilities and resources. The authority has given consideration to taking action to rectify these issues, but in its business plan acknowledges that those recommendations relating to workload and resources, particularly in the area of adoption support, remain.

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.

This local authority service currently has 20 approved adopters waiting for a match, 17 white, two white/black mixed and one Asian. The longest wait for matching has been a little over three years. There are 27 children waiting to be placed - 19 white, three black, one Asian and four of mixed race. Fifteen children have been referred to the Adoption Register in the last 12 months. Matching has proved sound over the past twelve months. There have not been any disruptions involving either Bromley children or Bromley adopters.

Prospective adopters are subject to a formal, thorough and comprehensive assessment, preparation and approval process. There is a clearly set out preparation programme, however this is carried out before a formal application is taken, contrary to national guidance. Adopters stated that they found the preparation to be well handled, well balanced and useful. They were able to meet adopters who had been through the process. They were not given the opportunity to meet birth parents, as some of them would have liked, but they did watch a video which they found helpful. They were asked to complete feedback forms at the end of the programme. A minority commented that they had been surprised to be told at the end of the course that they would receive feedback on their performance, as they had been informed at the start that this would not be the case. More positive comments received from adopters included 'I felt realistically informed'; 'the agency is child centred, there is a deep respect for the child's birth history'; and 'overall a positive experience and we would recommend them to friends'.

Adopters commented that they had approximately 12 -13 home visits. These include a health and safety check which considers any pets the applicants might have. The checklist used does not include looking for dangerous plants, blind cords, ornamental weapons, guns or knives. A second opinion visit is also carried out. A number of the assessments took far longer to complete than the accepted nine-month duration. Adopters fed back that they had found the assessment to be lengthy, but very thorough and helpful. They described it as eye opening but not intimidating. They felt that communication was good and they were listened to.

Mixed comments were received from adopters regarding the post adoption contact with the agency, and the matching process. A number were of the opinion that staff were poor at keeping in contact with them, and they felt that unless they contacted the service, no progress would be made. This perception is not borne out from information in the case files, which show that staff maintain regular contact in most instances. Adopters felt that they were usually given clear written information about

potential matches. Use is made of the Adoption Register as necessary. The agency does not have a written procedure covering the use of this register. Information is obtained for the child from the prospective adopters in a number of formats including video.

The agency has a well organised panel which is effective in making appropriate recommendations about children suitable for adoption, the suitability of prospective adopters and the matching of children to approved adopters. Applicants are given the opportunity to attend panel. The panel advisor informed inspectors that panel members had an understanding of the decision making process if they could not reach an agreement regarding a recommendation, but that this is not currently included in the panel policies and procedures.

The panel is properly constituted, albeit unusually, it has three councillors amongst its members. New panel members are enabled to observe a panel before fully participating. Panel members are vetted in line with the Regulations. It was noted that not all of their recruitment files contained a photograph or evidence of relevant qualifications. Joint training is held between panel members and the adoption team. This was appreciated by both parties.

Panels are held every month. They take place in the evening, which has led to a number of very late finishes. The timing of the panels is not popular amongst many of the participants. This has been acknowledged by the agency and two day time panels are planned for forthcoming months.

Most of the decisions by the agency decision maker are made in a timely manner. However, it was noted that two recent decisions had not been communicated in writing to the applicants within the required timescale. Some of the decision documents on file were unsigned.

The manager and staff working in the adoption service are suitable to work with children and young people and safeguard and promote their welfare. All appropriate vetting is carried out, and as a matter of course the agency repeats Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks every three years. Almost all social work staff have obtained a post qualifying child care qualification.

Any safeguarding concerns are referred directly to the authority's referral and assessment team. They would lead on any issues that arise. There have been three child protection referrals in the last twelve months. All were investigated but none needed to progress to case conferences.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

In the main, adoptive parents are helped and supported to provide stable and permanent homes for the children placed with them. There has been an ongoing increase in the level of request for support. In the last year there have been twenty

requests from adopters and/or children for assessment for adoption support, and the agency has provided a service to eighteen of them. The agency stated that in the last twelve months all of the children placed received some sort of support, be that financial, education, support from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service or group support. The agency runs a successful support group for adoptive fathers and hopes to set up a support group for older adopted children and an adoption forum. All members of the adoption team are involved in some way with adoption support. This places huge pressures on the team, and the increased demands on staff time for support has meant that there has been an increase in waiting times for some services, such as access to information and intermediary services.

The agency stated that almost all of the children placed retained some level of contact with their birth families. A designated letterbox coordinator provides the initial point of contact for information and advice. An annual picnic takes place, which is held in high regard by adopters. Comments received from adopters included 'we feel very supported', and 'our overall experience was very positive'.

It should be noted that a minority of adopters stated that they felt extremely let down by the service. They commented that they requested support but were told that unless they were at crisis point the agency could not help. Some staff confirmed that this is what they had had to tell some adopters. The manager of the service did not agree with this viewpoint, and the documentary evidence provided did suggest that this was not the case, and that, as stated above, the vast majority of requests for support had been met, at least to a degree. This does not negate the frustrations felt by some adopters, and in these instances at the very least there had been a breakdown in communication.

Where the agency cannot provide a service, it refers enquirers to alternative services which might be able to help. Staff work hard to ensure that life story work and later life letters are produced. Although not strictly within the remit of the adoption team to provide these essential documents, they work closely with colleagues in the Looked After Children and Safeguarding teams to ensure the work is completed. Members of these teams expressed their appreciation of the support of the adoption staff in this area.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency works with birth parents to enable effective plans to be made and implemented for their child. They are enabled to access an adoption development worker for birth families, who is independent of the child's social worker, once adoption is identified as the plan for the child. A number of birth parents met with inspectors. They were critical of their initial contact with the authority, and felt that they had not been listened to. Some raised concerns about the ways in which information was made available to them. All, however, said that once they had been provided with access to the adoption development worker, the situation had greatly improved. They felt supported and consulted.

Efforts are made to obtain for the child clear and appropriate information from the birth parents and birth families about themselves and life before the child's adoption. This includes making films and audio records. It was noted that not all files examined contained photographs of birth parents. Staff commented that they endeavour to obtain pictures wherever possible.

The agency had policies and procedures in place for the services it provides. The manager is fully informed of the current level of service provision, which members of staff are involved in each aspect of the service, and where any shortfalls may be arising. Regular monitoring takes place of the individualised services being provided, and whether the service is delivering the outcomes that it is intended to achieve.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The agency is above its target in recruiting adopters from black and minority ethnic communities. Due consideration is given to achieving as close a match as possible with regard to ethnicity. Efforts are made to communicate with service users who may have difficulty with written information, or who may need to communicate, for example, in sign language.

There is a clear written statement of the aims and objectives of the adoption service, which describes the facilities and services provided. The children's guide is colourful, with very good pictures and captions. The guide includes details of the complaints process. Some children may find it difficult to understand all of the accompanying text.

The agency recruits adopters from diverse backgrounds. It is currently focusing on assessing and approving adopters who are looking to adopt children over the age of six, or sibling groups of three or more, or children with disability or children from a black or ethnic minority background. Enquirers into adoption are provided with an information pack, and are invited to an information evening.

The manager of the services is appropriately qualified, experienced and knowledgeable. There are well established lines of communication and accountability. The manager is supported by a deputy, and is supervised by a senior manager in the authority. The service is organised and managed efficiently, and generally delivers a good service.

There are a number of systems in place to ensure that the performance of the

service is of a satisfactory quality. The manager and deputy manager of the service regularly supervise their staff, and monitor case files. The authority's own quality assurance department also periodically monitors files. An annual report on adoption activity is produced by the manager, and bi annual reports are also produced by the interim head of care and resources, who supervises the adoption manager, for the corporate parenting panel. The adoption service is shortly due to commence using an electronic recording system, which it anticipates will enable the manager to carry out quicker and more diverse quality assurance checks.

The agency has an adequate level of administrative support. These staff were enthusiastic about the work they did, and committed to delivering a high quality service. They felt they were well managed, although they did express some concerns about future management once the fostering and adoption teams merge, as is planned in the near future. Accommodation for all of the adoption team is limited, and they do not have access to their own colour photocopier (necessary for letterbox copying and panel documents), instead they have to make use of one in a different building.

Adoption staff are appropriately qualified and experienced. They make up a small team and at times it is evident that they are very stretched, to the extent that occasionally they work at weekends. Nevertheless, all stated that they found the authority to be a good employer.

The authority has an in-house training programme which staff can access. The social workers commented that it was at times difficult to find specialist courses that would enhance their professional qualifications, but that they could also make use of courses that at first glance might not seem to be relevant. These include PowerPoint training, which is of use in the preparation group presentations. Administrative staff commented that they would like to be able to access courses relevant to adoption as they had to deal with a lot of initial enquiries and it would be helpful if they could increase their knowledge; and also attend the British Agency for Adoption and Fostering training in panel administration. There is a rolling programme in the authority for child protection training, however, only one of the administrators confirmed that they had undertaken it. The adoption manager prepares very helpful flowcharts for staff who have to interact with the adoption team, but who do not do so on a daily basis, so that they can keep up to date with adoption processes. These staff, including the Independent Reviewing Officers and staff from the Looked After Children teams, commented how useful this information was.

The majority of files inspected were well ordered and detailed. They do not have a running chronology which makes auditing a little more difficult. It was noted that in the minority of cases some of the records were not signed or dated, or contained pictures of birth parents. Some of the photographs that were on file were not dated or labelled. There was evidence of file auditing by the QA department, and file supervision by the adoption manager. The service has limited space for archiving its records. Although kept securely, not all files are safe from the risk of damage from fire or water.

There is a written policy on case recording, and, as mentioned, systems in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of records. Remedial action is taken to rectify any shortfalls. The authority has a central department which handles complaints.

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):

- ensure that the application for assessment is taken before the preparation group, and that this is reflected in the Statement of Purpose (NMS 4)
- ensure that recruitment files for panel members contain photographs and details of relevant qualifications (NMS 11)
- ensure that the time taken for assessment of potential adopters falls within the recommended guidelines (NMS 4)
- ensure that the agency decision is made, and conveyed in writing to the applicant, in a timely manner, and that the decision documents are always appropriately signed (NMS 13)
- ensure all staff working in adoption, including administrative staff, undergo training in safeguarding (NMS 32)
- ensure that there is a procedure in place that covers the arrangements for the use of services provided by the Adoption Register (NMS 16)
- ensure all records are appropriately signed and dated and, where possible and appropriate, contain dated pictures of birth parents (NMS 25)
- ensure that archived files are appropriately stored so as to protect them from fire and water damage (NMS 25)