

London Borough of Barnet Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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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 London Borough of Barnet 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 and support to people who have been affected by adoption.

The service operates from accessible premises in Whetstone, London, N20.

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 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. There have been a number of issues with regard to the adoption panel and reference is made to this subject within the report.

Adoptive families are well supported, both financially and by the creative use of Barnet'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 although it should be noted that some adopters interviewed stated they did not have a life story book after having a child placed with them for adoption. The agency commissioned a report on life story work within Barnet and this is referred to in the report.

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 September 2006, resulted in 3 statutory requirements. The first two requirements related to the quality of Child Permanence Reports (CPR) and ensuring that all statutory checks on applicants were completed before the application was heard by the adoption panel. The final requirement related to the agency taking a more proactive approach in engaging birth families in the adoption process, alongside an improvement in gathering information for the child on their family background. The agency has addressed these requirements and appropriate action has been taken with regard to the shortfalls identified, this significantly improving the overall quality of service it affords to service users.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

No standards matched to this ECM outcome.

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 and the agency has developed an adoption team plan for 2009/10 which identifies core functions and key tasks. 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. There are formalised systems in place to enable the adoption team to have an awareness of the children who may require an adoptive family and thus undertake timely planning to prevent delay. Clear assessments take place to look at sibling attachments in order to make sound decisions about separating or placing children with their brothers and sisters. The evidence seen also shows that every effort is made to place children in families which meet their cultural, religious and ethnicity needs. However, in line with the principles of 'Achieving the Right Balance', children's plans are not delayed in order to find a perfect match.

The recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters is a well thought out and comprehensive process. The adoption team hold regular information evenings throughout the 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 two social workers from the adoption team. If the enquirers' interest is accepted, they complete an application form and are invited on to the next preparation training course. The agency works in conjunction with the North London Consortium so

potential adopters are able to attend a preparation group ten months of the year. This consortium arrangement has proved of great benefit as it means potential adopters don't have a long wait to complete the preparation training course and helps to keep the prospective adopters focused. 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 although this is currently under review as it does not include the assessment of guns or ceremonial weapons. In addition it was noted that several health and safety checklists were not signed by the social worker or dated. This process ensures as far as possible that the adoptive parents are appropriately safe to care for children.

The assessments are analytical and address the competences needed for parenting an adoptive child. Adopters commented that their social workers are excellent, professional, supportive and easy to talk to. 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 North 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 and there is evidence that they observe the panel prior to commencing as a voting member. However due to a number of changes within the adoption agency new panel members were not given an appropriate induction programme and there was no panel training. In addition it was noted that members had not completed an appraisal for 2009. However the agency commissioned a panel improvement plan and it has started to meet to address these issues. The panel meets regularly, with the facility to hold extra panels if necessary, and there is no evidence that children's plans are delayed though 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 for decisions being made.

The agency decision maker, who is relatively new in her role, takes her role seriously

and has access to all the information to enable her to make her decision in a considered manner. The decision is made within the necessary timescales and letters to adopters and birth parents are appropriately worded and for the most part 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 good.

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, supportive and visiting regularly. 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 the agency run a number of social events throughout the year and adopters are able to access training and other courses through the consortium. The post adoption team are keen to develop the support to adopters and plans are being made to develop a newsletter and run a children's group. 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 good 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. In addition the agency will in certain circumstances offer financial support to enable adopters to build an extension to their house.

Children placed for adoption receive a good service from 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, work 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.

The agency has a robust complaints system and adopters spoken to are, for the most part aware of the complaints process. The agency takes any complaint seriously and responds, for the most part within agreed timescales, although one complaint was not responded to within the 28 day time limit.

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 good.

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 CPR. Children's views are also sought where appropriate and recorded on the CPR. Birth parents are offered the opportunity to access support from Adoption Plus from the time that adoption is identified as the plan for the child.

It is the responsibility of the child's social worker to ensure that all children have a life story book. Children who are of an appropriate age and understanding are also encouraged to contribute towards their life story book as are birth parents and other family members, where appropriate. 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. The expectation is for the life story book to be ready for the child once they are placed with their adoptive family. However, this is not always the case and some delay has been identified. In response to the issues regarding life story work the agency commissioned a report in September 2009 to ensure that all children have, as a minimum a life story book, a memento box and a later life letter.

There is a robust letterbox system in place which is currently managed by a social work assistant who is supported by senior staff. 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 agency co-ordinates direct contact between adopted children and their birth families where this is part of the adoption support plan and there is 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 want information about their birth family. In addition the agency provides support and advice to birth relatives who may want to try to trace their adopted child. The consortium organises a support group

for adopted adults that meets bi-monthly with positive feedback from those that have attended the group. The agency also subscribes to a registered support agency which provides a free outreach service for persons who are adopted and their birth family members.

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 Barnet is very welcoming and has a good understanding of diversity issues.

The agency is well managed at all levels although at the time of the inspection a number of senior staff were in an 'acting up' position due to circumstances beyond the control of the agency. 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 Barnet is a good place to work, being child-focussed 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 adoption 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. Comprehensive policies and procedures are in place which detail the expectations of recording, security arrangements, confidentiality and access to records.

Personnel files are 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 are 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):

- ensure that each member of the adoption panel receives appropriate induction training (NMS 11).
- ensure that all members have access to appropriate training and skill

development (NMS 11).

- Develop a more comprehensive health and safety checklist, to include firearms and ceremonial weapons (NMS 4).
- ensure that any complaint received by the agency is responded to within twenty-eight days from the date the complaint is received by the agency (NMS 33).
- ensure that life story books and later life letters are available for children in a timely way when they are placed for adoption (NMS 8).
- ensure that all panel members have an annual appraisal to identify training and development needs (NMS 23).