

# London Borough of Waltham Forest Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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<b>Setting address</b>	1c The Drive, LONDON, E17 3BN
<b>Telephone number</b>	0208 496 2470
<b>Email</b>	
<b>Registered person</b>	London Borough of Waltham Forest
<b>Registered manager</b>	Jane Anderson
<b>Responsible individual</b>	Alison Braden
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	16/01/2007

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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**

This is a local authority service, located within children's services. It recruits and approves adopters; identifies children for adoption; makes and supports placements; and offers post adoption support to adoptive families and adopted adults. It also offers adoption support to birth parents and birth families. The authority engages in a wide range of partnerships with specialist agencies to offer a variety of inputs and resources in the field of adoption counselling and support.

### **Summary**

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This was a key announced inspection, where all key national minimum standards were inspected. The service was found to be satisfactory with some good features. A number of adopters, birth parents and adults receiving post adoption support participated in the inspection. Both the adoption dataset and the self assessment were returned prior to the inspection. The self assessment is commendable both for its thoroughness and its honesty.

This inspection has resulted in 11 recommendations. These relate to case recording; assessments; the timing of the formal application; risk assessments; safeguarding procedures; recruitment documentation; services to birth parents; communication and the management of timescales and forward/contingency planning.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

The last inspection resulted in three requirements and 13 recommendations. The requirements related to staff recruitment, the archives, and adoption support plans. Compliance has not yet been reached with regard to the first two requirements and they have been repeated in this report. Adoption support planning has improved.

The recommendations related to the children's guide; delays in the matching process; child permanence reports; panel recruitment; the scope of the information provided to the agency decision maker upon which to base their decision; manager's qualifications; inter-country adoption work; case file recording and panel member recruitment. Positive action has been taken to rectify most of these issues, and the majority have been dealt with. Recommendations that have been repeated concern case recording, child permanence reports and panel recruitment.

## 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 needs, wishes, welfare and safety of the child are the focus of the adoption process. The authority has a sound plan in place to recruit adopters to meet the needs of children from a range of cultures and ethnic backgrounds. This plan is updated on a regular basis and at least annually. The plan identifies where there are shortfalls and how it intends to address these. A variety of forums are used to recruit, including national advertising. Older children are involved in developing their own profiles and their agreement to advertising is obtained before any campaigns are launched. DVDs are made of the children waiting to be adopted and a house style for profiling has been developed to ensure a consistently good standard.

Prospective adopters are involved in a formal, thorough assessment, preparation and approval process. The preparation programme is well set out and involves a good mix of speakers, including the looked after children's nurse, a child psychotherapist and the post adoption support team manager. Applicants commented favourably on this part of the process; however, a number stated it would have been very helpful if they had been able to meet with some birth parents at this stage. One information evening is held annually, and usually three preparation groups. Applicants can be fast tracked if necessary to meet the needs of a specific child, and the authority makes use of the resources of the consortium of which it is a member.

Contrary to The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, the authority takes formal applications after the preparation phase, and not before. It aims to complete the assessment process within an eight month timescale; however, records indicated that this was not being achieved in 50% of cases. In most of these instances there were valid reasons for delay. Some applicants commented negatively on the length of time the process took, and the lack of consistent, regular communication and documentation from the adoption team.

It is good practice that second opinion visits are carried out routinely for all assessments. The majority of the adopter assessments examined were thorough and detailed. In some cases the assessments lacked detailed exploration of the applicants' ability to understand and manage challenging behaviour. Health and safety checks are made of potential adopters homes. Staff are provided with a proforma but it does not contain specific reference to window blind cords, guns, ceremonial weapons or poisonous plants.

Adopters are given information about the matching, introduction and placement process. Some adopters commented on poorly managed final moves from foster

carers to adopters. There was also some negative comment on the late provision of information such as birth certificates, life story work and later life letters. Good use is made of the adoption register, and there was clear evidence that considerable effort was put into the matching process.

The adoption panel has clear written policies and procedures about the handling of their functions, and these are implemented in practice. There is a potential conflict of interest with the adoption panel advisor also holding the role of adoption assessment team manager, but both the panel chair and the authority group manager who is responsible for both adoption and fostering were of the view that this is currently well managed.

Prospective adopters are invited to panel. Feedback from them about the panel process was positive, as was feedback from both adoption and children's social workers. New panel members are given the opportunity to observe initially. Members have access to appropriate training and skills development and attend joint training with the adoption team. The panel has a diverse membership, with a good range of skills and access to specialist advisors. All panel members are appropriately vetted. They are expected to sign a confidentiality agreement. These agreements were evident on the files inspected, but not all were signed.

Panels are efficiently organised and conducted and convened regularly. Additional panels will be held if demand requires it. Members confirmed that they receive all the necessary information in advance of the panel. The agency decision maker stated that they received all relevant documentation upon which to make a decision, and that this decision is made within the prescribed timescales. Their decision is conveyed in writing to both applicants and birth parents. The letter used is ambiguous and does not make it clear that a decision has been made by the agency decision maker. These letters were not in evidence on all of the files inspected.

The people who work for the authority are suitable to work with children, and they are managed, trained and supported in such a way as to ensure the best possible outcomes for children. The authority ensures that it repeats Criminal Records Bureau disclosures for its adoption staff every three years, thus promoting the welfare of the children it cares for. The manager of the service has a satisfactory disclosure and was appropriately vetted. Her team also has satisfactory disclosures on file, although not all of the documentation required in the regulations was evident. Missing information related to reasons why staff had left previous employment working with children and exploration of gaps in employment history. One file also lacked a suitable photograph.

In the event of any safeguarding concerns the adoption team is advised to consult the London-wide child protection procedures for guidance on how to manage and report child protection matters. These procedures do not make specific reference to adoption support services and no more than a passing mention of adoption services in general. It is insufficient for an authority to rely solely on these procedures for its adoption services.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is good.

Adoptive parents are helped and supported to provide stable and permanent homes for the children placed with them. There are clear policies and procedures which govern the delivery of adoption support services. All adopters are provided with a two year subscription to Adoption UK. They can access a variety of services including training, help lines, support groups, literature, letterbox contact, direct contact and specific support packages from a national charity. Adoptive parents can directly access services from the child and adolescent mental health service. The authority provides a range of booklets to support the services they offer. Access to health and education support is good, as is access to medical and legal advice.

A member of the adoption support team attends preparation and delivers a half day session on contact. One benefit of this is to introduce the support team to the adopters at an early stage. The authority shows a strong commitment to supporting adopted children and provides them with the same service as other looked after children. Members of the team also provide a consultation service which fellow social workers can access for advice and guidance.

Services are offered to adopted adults including intermediary work, counselling and searches for birth parents. They can also receive a service from a national voluntary organisation for counselling of adopted people. With regards to potential adopters, adoptive parents and adopted children and adults, the authority provides an appropriate service that is tailored to meet individual needs. These service users are treated fairly, openly and with respect throughout their contact with the authority.

## **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is inadequate.

Birth parents are entitled to services that recognise the lifelong implications of adoption. While there is no doubt that staff in the adoption team are committed to working with birth parents, the actual provision of services to them is haphazard. There is no coordinated planning, and when a service is provided it is often by the same social worker as for the child.

The authority has a service level agreement with a national charity to provide support to birth parents, but it is questionable at what stage in the process, if at all, birth parents are informed of this. Where there was evidence that birth parents had been informed, it was at the family finding stage, rather than much earlier on in the process, when the birth parent might have been better able to be involved in the adoption plan and provide input into the maintenance of their child's heritage, through a life story book for example. The life story books that were presented for the inspection were very good, but it is not clearly defined who is responsible for producing them, and production is, therefore, inconsistent.

Feedback from birth parents was mixed. Comments ranged from feeling like they had been left out of the whole process, to acknowledging that the team had worked with the best interest of their child in mind. Positive feedback was given from a birth parent who felt that the adoption team had kept him informed at all stages, but that they had not fully explored alternatives to adoption.

In respect of birth parents and families, much more could be done to engage them at an earlier stage, and making clear what support services are available to them and how these can be accessed. Where a service is provided, following an assessment of need, both the assessment and service provision are satisfactory.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is satisfactory.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Staff can access an e-learning course, which provides an introduction to equality and diversity. The authority has its own diversity team which regularly holds equality impact surgeries, and it has achieved level four of the equality standard for local government. The panel is diverse, and the diversity amongst the adoption team has improved since the last inspection. There is a specific team for children with disabilities, and they provided positive feedback regarding their interaction with the adoption team. The recruitment plan for adopters clearly identifies where there are shortfalls in adopters from specific communities and ethnic origins, and the authority is trying to address this. Considerable effort is made to try to match children with adopters who reflect their ethnicity, religion and language.

There is a clear written statement of the aims and objectives of the adoption service. It contains all of the required information and is updated annually. The children's guide is presented in the form of a delightful story book. Older children are provided with the British Agency for Adoption and Fostering guide to adoption.

The authority aims to recruit adopters from diverse backgrounds, who can offer a child a stable and permanent home. There are systems in place to prioritise prospective adopters who are most likely to meet the needs of children who are waiting. It has recently produced a new booklet for prospective adopters. This includes information on what adoption is; who can adopt; who the children are; how to become an adopter; and what happens once you have been approved. It also contains leaflets about the Independent Review Mechanism and how to complain.

The service is overseen by a group manager, who also oversees the fostering service. Both the adoption assessment team and the adoption support team have an

identified manager. All of these individuals were highly spoken of by their team members, who felt there were clear lines of communication and strong support. There is a lack of clarity regarding responsibilities and accountability, with less positive feedback from other professionals who feel that the service lacks prompt decision making, and both forward and contingency planning. More encouragingly, other professionals also commented that the adoption team is open, accepting of new ideas, and has a holistic approach towards children. They feel the team inspires confidence, and in particular singled out adoption support for their clear and transparent communication, their level of commitment and their practical support.

There are written procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service and ensuring quality performance, but this was difficult to evidence in practice. The panel provides a robust monitoring role, the lead councillor provides an oversight, and a review of the service is conducted bi-annually, with a report being produced. Quality assurance systems had not identified that file monitoring, for example, was not taking place in accordance with procedures, or clarified the reasons for considerable drift in a number of assessments.

There is an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff to meet the needs of the service. Staff retention is good, and all staff spoken with were enthusiastic about their work and their team. Adopters were complimentary about the staff, describing them as caring, committed and very much child centred.

There is a good quality training programme to enhance individual skills and to keep staff up to date with professional and legal developments. Training undergone by some team members in the last year includes child appreciation days; introduction to therapy; working with the angry child; preparing parents for adoption; life story work; attachment; direct work techniques; narrative story stem observation; making good adoption assessments; introductions training; assessing and placing with gay and lesbian adopters; and producing a later life letter. Staff can make use of training opportunities through the consortium.

Case records for children and prospective/approved adopters are kept securely, and are accessible when required. Records are comprehensive, but in some cases lack attention to detail, with some missing agency decision letters, while others contained unsigned documents, including unidentified photographs.

Mention has already been made in the report regarding documentation missing from recruitment files, and unsigned documentation in panel member files. Complaints are maintained in a central log. There have been three made since the beginning of this year. Only one of these records included the conclusion and action taken as a result, albeit the information was maintained elsewhere. Archived files are kept at a central dedicated location. Files are not kept in fire and water resistant cabinets, albeit an informal, unwritten, risk assessment has been carried out to ensure that the risk from fire and water has been minimised. This is contrary to the disaster recovery plan which states that the archived files are kept in fire retardant cabinets and that there is a written risk assessment which is reviewed annually.

## 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 formal application is taken before the preparation group (Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, Regulation 22)
- ensure that prospective adopters are kept informed of progress throughout (NMS 4.9)
- ensure that the agency prepares a child's permanence report which is of acceptable quality (Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, Regulation 17/NMS 25)
- ensure that all required recruitment documentation is obtained for members of staff and panel members (NMS 19)
- ensure that the authority has appropriate adoption safeguarding policies and procedures in place (NMS 32)
- ensure that birth parents are offered support services that recognise the lifelong implications of adoption (NMS 7, 8, 9)
- ensure that the authority can evidence that it has minimised the risk of damage to archived files (NMS 25.2)
- ensure that information collected for a child from birth parents and birth families is collated and passed to the child (NMS 8)
- ensure that comprehensive and accurate case records are maintained for each child, prospective adopter and approved adopters (NMS 25)
- ensure that there are clear procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the adoption service, and that the application of these can be evidenced in practice (NMS 17)
- ensure that adoption methodology is effective, efficient, proactive and includes contingency planning and timescales. (NMS 16)