

London Borough of Tower Hamlets Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Rosemary Chapman / Rossella Volpi
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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 London Borough of Tower Hamlets provides a comprehensive adoption service through its Permanent Placements Team and Post Adoption Team, based at Mulberry Place, undertaking all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters, including those who wish to adopt from overseas; the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters; the support of adoption placements; post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, including birth records counselling and intermediary work; and support to birth parents of children placed for adoption or who have been adopted.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This inspection was a key, announced inspection, which took place over four days and involved two inspectors.

The recruitment of adopters is targeted to the needs of the children for whom Tower Hamlets require adoptive families. The preparation, assessment and approval of adopters is rigorous and supported by a child-centred, focussed adoption panel. The matching of children to adopters is a very well thought out and formalised process, which ensures adopters receive full information before making a decision to proceed with the match.

Support to adopters both pre and post order is good and a range of help is available. The agency demonstrates an impressive commitment to supporting birth parents, which continues long after their children have been adopted. There are robust structures in place which promote the maintenance of a child's heritage and facilitate contact arrangements, both direct and indirect.

The findings of this inspection demonstrate that the agency is well managed and committed to maintain and improve services for adopted children. Staff are fully supported through supervision and good access to training opportunities. The main areas for development revolve around record keeping.

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency has responded appropriately to all previous actions and recommendations. A significant development since the previous inspection has been the employment of a social worker to improve the life story work undertaken by the children's social workers. A further development has been the establishment of a

separate post adoption team to improve services for adopters, adopted adults and birth parents.

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 has a well thought out recruitment strategy which is evaluated to ensure resources are targeted where they are needed and where they are most likely to be successful. There is a clear recognition of the needs of the children waiting for adoptive families and a variety of methods, some of which are very innovative, are used to increase the profile of adoption.

There is a formalised matching process which facilitates the prompt referral of children to the adoption team, early allocation of a family finder and regular meetings and monitoring systems which prevent drift. Family finders are innovative in their approach and successful in finding families for children with very complex needs. Children's needs in relation to race, culture, religion and placement with siblings are given a high priority.

The agency has a very thorough process for undertaking an initial assessment of people expressing an interest in becoming adoptive parents which ensures their resources are targeted at applicants who are most likely to be suitable and successful in their application. There is then a formal and thorough preparation, assessment and approval process. The preparation training is viewed positively by adopters who say it highlights the importance of contact and the maintenance of a child's heritage and is successful in helping them revise their views. The training is evaluated regularly, modified in the light of the evaluation and there are plans to provide an information day for family and friends of applicants.

The assessments are thorough, analytical and based on a competency model. Staff are sensitive and professional in their dealings with applicants and keep them informed of the progress of the assessment. However, there is not a consistent practice of seeking an employer reference at the moment. The health and safety checklist does not make reference to guns, weapons, poisonous plants or hanging cords.

Adopters receive full information about children whom they are considering as possible matches for their family and have the opportunity to meet foster carers and the medical adviser to supplement this. Social workers are instrumental in assisting them to fully consider the implications for their family and are supported in their decision making. The agency is considering the development of life appreciation days

as a further mechanism for providing first hand information to adopters.

The adoption panel is underpinned by comprehensive policies and procedures. There is a well-established practice of adopter attendance at the panel, both for approval and matches and adopters report that they are made to feel welcome and put at ease, despite the formality of the occasion.

An issue regarding the tenure of the panel chair was highlighted during the inspection. The agency took immediate and appropriate action to rectify the situation, demonstrating a responsible approach to an error they had made. Panel members receive an induction and have opportunities for training, including joint training with agency staff. The panel is well run, all members make a full contribution, they are well prepared and give matters serious and thorough consideration. The panel is well organised, the papers are well presented and the minutes are comprehensive. However, the extracts of the minutes which appear in the case files do not detail the panel membership and thus do not demonstrate quoracy.

The agency decision maker demonstrates a considered and thorough approach to making her decision, which is carried out in a timely way. However, she does not sign a decision sheet and the letters which are sent to adopters and birth parents notifying them of the decision do not make the process as clear as they should.

Appropriate and robust recruitment and selection procedures are in place for the manager and social work staff, who are all suitably qualified and experienced. However, administrative staff are not subject to criminal records bureau (CRB) clearance. Safeguarding procedures make reference to children placed for adoption, including historical abuse and all staff receive regular and updated training in this area.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency offers a good level of support to adoptive families both before and after the adoption order is made. Following approval, social workers and prospective adopters agree a written post approval support plan which ensures everyone is aware of the level of contact expected. The majority of adopters are happy with the level of support and any dissatisfactions have been resolved.

There is a very comprehensive training programme in place for foster carers and adopters which includes issues such as contact, behaviour management and attachment. Specific workshops for adopters also take place and there is an adopters' support group. The agency produces a newsletter three to four times a year, which is of a good quality and very informative. There are also social events twice a year, which offer opportunities for adopters and their children to get together, meet other adoptive families, make friendships and support links.

There is good access to the Help4U service which is a multidisciplinary team offering play therapy, family therapy, psychological and psychiatric support to looked after children. Access to this service is enhanced by one member of the team being situated in the family placement section for half her working week, despite being funded by another agency. This is a good example of partnership working and multi-agency links being forged. This worker offers consultation to staff, joint working and quick and easy referral to the team if other services are required. Although it is a service for looked after children, the team is able to be flexible and work with children who are adopted and live out of the Borough, to ensure their needs are met.

There is a clear process for referral to the post adoption team which is facilitated by a daily duty system. Assessments for post adoption support are in place, as are post adoption support plans and these are reviewed and shared with adoptive families. Adopters are generally happy with the level of support they receive and have their needs met, although some dissatisfactions were raised. These related to consistency of support and a perceived lack of exploration by Tower Hamlets with adopters of what can be made available. The post adoption team also provide support for special guardianship and this is proving to be quite a commitment in terms of the complexity of the work needed. The agency is aware of this and is monitoring the impact on the provision of support to adoptive families. There are also plans to develop the links with education to improve this aspect of the service.

The agency has access to both medical and legal advice, both of which are said to be accessible and useful.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The agency demonstrates a lifelong commitment to working with birth parents and this is a real strength of the service. Although the Child Permanence Reports (CPR) seen during the inspection do not consistently record the views of birth parents, there is clear evidence that social workers do work with birth parents to ascertain their wishes and feelings in relation to the adoption of their children. Social workers demonstrate a commitment to undertaking this task and the panel is robust in questioning this aspect of the work which comes before it. The agency is aware of this weakness and is making efforts to address it.

The agency has a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with a registered Adoption Support Agency (ASA) to provide an independent service to birth parents. However, the post adoption team will also work with birth parents, thus offering a choice of support, and there was evidence in the files seen that a high standard of work is undertaken by this team.

The support to birth parents continues for as long as it is needed and in one case, this was still continuing after a period of eighteen years. There are three social events for birth parents each year and the benefits of this to birth parents are evident. One of these events is the Service of Hope which takes place on Mothering

Sunday and offers recognition and validation for birth mothers of the children they have lost to adoption. This is extremely innovative and demonstrates great sensitivity. The other events are the summer outing and a Christmas lunch. The ASA also provides support groups and counselling which birth parents can access through the SLA arrangements.

There are also robust arrangements in place for maintaining a child's heritage. One positive development since the last inspection is the appointment of a social worker for life story work. This social worker brings commitment and enthusiasm to this area of work and provides training for social workers and foster carers, offers regular consultation, undertakes joint work and provides a good range of resources. This raises the profile of this task and is a constant reminder of the need to undertake life story work in a timely way. Social workers commented on how helpful this has been to them in relation to both life story work and later in life letters. The life story books seen are of a high standard. The business plan highlights areas for further development which include family story meetings and life story plans.

The letterbox system is well administered. Each contact arrangement has an allocated social worker which provides a named person in the case of any difficulties. The arrangements for receipt and distribution of the contacts are robust and there is a reminder system in place. Social workers give assistance with letter writing and will contact either party when arrangements go awry. The agency is involved in a number of direct contacts and these are maintained and supported with a high level of commitment, both in terms of finance and social work time, in recognition of the importance of this for the child's emotional wellbeing.

There is a commitment to working with adopted adults and birth relatives. The agency produces a number of leaflets which advertise and outline the services provided and there was evidence seen of good pieces of work with adopted adults and birth relatives in relation to tracing, intermediary work, birth records counselling and support. The agency takes its responsibilities in relation to this very seriously.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The Statement of Purpose is a well-written document; it is reflective of the service, informative, comprehensive, yet easy to understand. The Children's Guide which is currently in use, is suitable for older children, but not for younger children or those with more complex needs. The written information for applicants is well produced and available in a number of different languages to meet the diverse needs of the population of the Borough.

The agency is effectively managed both strategically and operationally. Managers at all levels are qualified, experienced, knowledgeable and committed to the service. There are clear lines of delegation, roles and responsibilities throughout the organisation. Some changes have taken place in the management team but this has not had a detrimental effect on the service and there is a clear vision and strategy for implementation. The adoption team work effectively with the placing social workers to ensure that sound placements are made and outcomes for children are good. All staff thought that the move to the current premises had been an important factor in achieving this cohesive approach and had improved communication. The administrative staff are an important part of the service, recognised and acknowledged as such, and there is a "whole service" approach to providing a cohesive, seamless service to anyone whose lives have been touched by adoption.

The executive side of the council have clear strategies in place to monitor the work of the agency, including a corporate parenting steering group chaired by the lead member, regular meetings with chief officers and regular receipt of performance indicators and reports.

Tower Hamlets is a good employer. Staff receive regular and effective supervision, there are supportive and accessible managers, training is readily available and appropriate to the needs of staff and the service and there is a strong emphasis on encouraging professional development. Currently there are sufficient staff to deliver the adoption service in an efficient and effective manner.

Case files, both on adopters and children, are well organised and contain evidence of case decisions made in supervision and file audits. However, neither the family finding file nor the child's case file meet the requirements of a child's adoption file and there is no separate file in place for the other party in an interagency placement.

Personnel files on staff contain evidence of appropriate recruitment and selection checks. However, the files on panel members do not contain the necessary information. For example, references were missing on one file, proof of qualifications are not on the files of professionals, home addresses and dates of birth are not detailed in every case, there are no details of relevant experience, two CRB checks had not been carried out by Tower Hamlets, another was recently out of date and the staff members' panel files do not contain copies of the documents required.

The adoption service moved to its present premises in November 2006; they are appropriate for the purpose, accessible and provide safe and secure storage for records. Archive arrangements are maintained by a company with whom the Borough have a contract.

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
19	undertake CRB checks on administrative staff (Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003, Regulation 11 and Schedule 3)	16/05/2008
25	develop a system for setting up a child's adoption file (Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, Regulation 12)	16/05/2008
25	develop a separate file for the other party in an interagency placement (Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, Regulation 31(8))	16/05/2008
28	ensure that files on panel members contain full information as detailed in Schedules 3 and 4 (Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003, Regulations 11 and 15).	16/05/2008

Recommendations

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

- undertake employer references on all applicants (National Minimum Standard 4)
- develop the health and safety checklist to cover the issues of guns, weapons, poisonous plants and hanging cords (National Minimum Standard 4)
- ensure the extract of panel minutes includes the panel membership (National Minimum Standard 12)
- ensure a decision sheet is signed and placed in the case files and the letters which notify the parties of the decision should make the process clear (National Minimum Standard 13)
- develop a Children's Guide which meets the needs of younger children who are placed for adoption (National Minimum Standard 1).