

Wandsworth Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Rosemary Chapman / Mike Stapley
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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 Wandsworth provides a comprehensive adoption service through its Adoption and Permanency Team and its Family Plus Team. The agency undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters, both domestic and inter-country; 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 signposting to intermediary services; 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 was a key, announced inspection, undertaken by two inspectors over a period of four days and included interviews with key staff, adoptive parents, observation of the adoption panel, case files and other documentary reading.

The agency provides a good service to all involved in the adoption process. Permanency planning for children is particularly good and family finding is given a high priority. The adoption panel is child-focussed and robust.

Adoptive families are well-supported both pre and post order and the Family Plus Team demonstrate a high degree of commitment to provide appropriate support and training to children and families. Financial support packages are generous to promote and facilitate the placement of children with particular needs and sibling groups.

Services to birth families are the weakest part of the service, which is reactive rather than responsive to requests for support.

The agency is well-managed, both structurally and operationally, good monitoring procedures are in place and staff are well motivated and committed to the high standards expected by Wandsworth. Weaknesses lie in some aspects of documentation.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the previous inspection, nine actions and 21 recommendations were made. All these have been addressed satisfactorily. The agency have made significant improvements in its adoption service. Post adoption support, financial support and adoption support plans are now firmly embedded in practice. Permanency planning

meetings are well-established and adoption as a plan for children's permanency is always a consideration.

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 sound understanding of the needs of children who require adoptive families. There is a written recruitment strategy in place and some efforts have been made to increase awareness and interest in adoption from within the black and minority ethnic community. However, the responsibility for recruitment lies with the adoption team, rather than a specialist recruitment officer with specific marketing and publicity skills and is less strategic than it could be.

There is a structured approach to permanency planning and family finding which prevents drift. Children who may need an adoptive family are identified at an early stage, referred to the adoption team and there is a system of close monitoring to ensure appropriate actions are being taken. Senior managers chair permanency planning meetings which emphasises the importance placed on this process. Good communication takes place between the adoption team and the children's teams to ensure there are good outcomes for children. There is clear evidence that good quality sibling assessments are undertaken, children are placed in families which meet their assessed needs and the agency makes good use of consortium and interagency arrangements. Family finders are committed to finding the best possible families for children, demonstrating drive and enthusiasm and the agency has recently been successful in placing a number of large sibling groups together.

The agency has a formal, thorough process for the preparation, assessment and approval of prospective adopters. Enquirers receive a quick response and have an initial meeting with a social worker. The agency runs two preparation courses a year and can access the training of other agencies to facilitate quicker access for their applicants if necessary. All the team are involved in the preparation training which enables applicants to meet all the social workers at some point. They then give feedback to applicants at a post preparation visit and the current practice is to take the formal application to adopt at this point. The guidance on the Adoption and Children Act 2002 is clear that the application should be taken prior to the preparation training. Adopters spoken with were very positive about the preparation training and described it as well-structured and well-organised. The assessments of adopters are analytical, competency based, robust checks are undertaken and second opinion visits are routinely carried out. The health and safety checklist is comprehensive.

Prospective adopters are given full information about children and offered the

opportunity to meet foster carers, other relevant professionals and the medical adviser. Consideration is also being given to the establishment of child appreciation days as part of this practice. The agency has recently adopted a more rigorous approach to planning introductions, through a formalised system of meetings at the start, middle and end of the introductory period. This is evidence based and although time consuming, clearly outlines roles and responsibilities and gives structure to the process and allows everyone time and space to air their views.

The agency has a robust adoption panel which is properly constituted with members who bring a good range of experience, both professional and personal. It meets frequently and adopters are invited to attend for both approval and matching. Panel members have opportunities for regular training and new members have access to an induction held by the local consortium, as well as discussions with the chair and panel adviser and panel observation. All panel members have Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks at standard level but there is not a systematic approach to the renewal of these checks, which has led to one being out of date. The panel is well organised, thorough, child-focussed and the administration and minutes are of an extremely high standard. Panel members declare an interest if they have had some involvement or knowledge of a case under consideration but the action taken following this declaration is not clearly managed or documented. Although the minutes state the panel membership, they do not clarify the role of each panel member and thus quoracy cannot be determined without a more in-depth knowledge of the membership. The agency decision is made in a timely way, taking into account all the relevant information including the minutes.

Appropriate recruitment and selection procedures for the manager and staff of the agency are in place and relevant checks are undertaken. Staff are suitably qualified, knowledgeable and experienced. Written safeguarding procedures make reference to children placed for adoption and cover allegations of historical abuse. Staff receive appropriate training in safeguarding.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency provides good support to adopters both pre and post order. This includes generous financial support packages which can be made to facilitate the placement of children who are harder to place, either because they are part of a large sibling group or have particular needs. Children's social workers prepare comprehensive adoption support plans in conjunction with the Adoption Team and Family Plus Team and any on-going issues are raised with the Family Plus Team to ensure that potential or existing needs are known about and met. The adoption team provide support to adoptive families prior to the adoption order being made, then this role passes to the Family Plus Team once a child is adopted.

The Family Plus Team run an adopter support group on a Friday morning, which is well received by the adopters who attend. However, the timing of the group limits attendance to those parents who are at home with their children. Currently there are

no social events but the team has recently published a newsletter which is sent out to all adopters. There is no programme of training but training has been arranged in response to requests from adopters and they can link in with other agencies training. One particularly well-received training course which was run by Wandsworth is "Beyond Consequences", which is a 10 week parenting programme. This course was put on as a response to adopters struggling with behaviour and the commitment and enthusiasm of the staff from the Family Plus Team who ran the course is extremely impressive. Adopters have also taken part in other types of training and commented that the Family Plus Team listen to them and are responsive to their needs. The Family Plus Team work directly with children and families and signpost or refer to other services such as counselling, or other support groups run within the consortium. There is good evidence of interagency and multi-agency working to support Wandsworth children who are placed elsewhere.

Structurally the Family Plus Team are placed within different management arrangements to their colleagues in the adoption team. Despite this, there is a commitment to make links and have good communication, but there are no joint team meetings or whole service days where both teams meet, share ideas and experiences and use the learning from one aspect of the service to influence the other. The provision of post adoption support is also fragmented as the services to adopted adults are dealt with by the adoption team.

The agency has access to good medical and legal advice. Other services available to children prior to being adopted include the services of a child psychologist based in the fostering team, a nurse for looked after children and educational support. These services are not as readily available to an adopted child.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency make every effort to work with birth parents to obtain their wishes and feelings in relation to the plans for adoption and these are recorded on the Child Permanence Reports (CPR) when they are obtained. Birth parents receive a pack of information when the plan for adoption of their child is made and this includes information about the independent service for birth parents. Children's social workers demonstrate a commitment to remind birth families of this service and an awareness that this could be used at varying points in the adoption process. Children's social workers are also committed to undertaking life story work and demonstrated an awareness of the importance of this. The Family Plus Team also undertake life story work post order to assist children and young people come to terms with and understand their history.

The agency has a well managed letterbox arrangement for indirect contact, which is administered by the initial contact worker, who is a member of the family plus team. This worker also facilitates direct contacts. Feedback from birth relatives is positive in relation to the support and assistance they receive in managing contact arrangements.

The agency does not have a proactive or strategic approach in relation to services for birth families once an adoption order is granted. For example, it does not have a clear written policy and procedures in relation to Birth Relative Initiated Contact (BRIC), it does not run any support groups or social activities for birth parents and services are not actively promoted.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency's Statement of Purpose is clear and outlines the aims and objectives of the service. The agency has developed a more child-friendly Children's Guide which is currently in draft form. This is a very good piece of work, which reflects the services provided by Wandsworth's adoption service and is easy to read.

The initial written information which is sent to enquirers is child-focussed and gives very clear information about the children who require adoptive families. However, it does not state the eligibility criteria, give details of the process or outline the agency's stance on issues such as smoking, health issues, marital status and so forth. The agency has separate information for those interested in adopting from overseas.

The agency is well-managed. There are clear lines of responsibility and accountability, the manager is skilled, experienced, knowledgeable and gives good leadership. The executive member is well informed and committed to achieving good outcomes for looked after children. Various systems are in place for monitoring the work of the adoption service but there was no evidence that this included a six monthly report to the executive side of the council.

Wandsworth is a fair and competent employer. Staff know the standards and expectations are high and are supported to achieve these through supervision and good training opportunities. There was no evidence of any shortfall in service provision and administrative support was said to be 'brilliant' by all the teams of social workers. However, the administrative worker in the adoption team has a large number of responsibilities, a large number of social workers to support and also assists with the panels when necessary.

Case files on adopters are well ordered and information is easily accessible. Children's adoption files are both electronic and paper and together are designed to provide all the information required by regulation. However, those inspected did not do so; neither did they contain an index which detailed the requirements for the

contents of an adoption file. All case files provide evidence that they are audited and case decisions made in supervision are clearly detailed. Files are appropriately stored and policies and procedures are in place relating to access of case records. The files on staff and panel members contain all the required information although this was difficult to access in the staff files as they are not well ordered. The agency operates from suitable premises and the arrangements for archiving are satisfactory.

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
4	take the written application to be assessed as an adopter prior to preparation training (Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, regulation 22)	06/06/2008
11	devise a systematic approach to the renewal of CRB checks on panel members to ensure they are renewed before they expire (Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations 11)	06/06/2008
25	ensure the contents of a child's adoption file meet the requirements of the legislation (Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, regulations 12 and 15).	06/06/2008

Recommendations

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

- ensure that any conflict of interest declared in the adoption panel is clearly assessed and documented (National Minimum Standard 10)
- develop a more strategic and proactive approach to the services provided to birth relatives once an adoption order is made (National Minimum Standard 9)
- ensure the initial written information sent to enquirers contains sufficient information about the eligibility criteria and the process for becoming an approved adopter (National Minimum Standard 3)
- ensure that the executive side of the Council receive a 6 monthly report on the management and outcomes of the adoption agency (National Minimum Standard 17)
- assess the work load of the administrative post in the adoption team (National Minimum Standard 20).