

# London Borough of Lambeth Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	Rossella Volpi / Rosemary Dancer
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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 Lambeth provides a comprehensive and anti-discriminatory adoption service, undertaking all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation. The primary aim is to ensure that children, whose care plan is adoption, are placed as a matter of priority within a loving and supportive family, who can meet their needs during childhood and beyond.

The duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters; 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; support to birth parents of children placed for adoption or who have been adopted. Lambeth also undertakes assessments of applicants who wish to adopt from overseas and step parent adoptions. The office premises are located in Brixton.

Lambeth is part of the South London Adoption Consortium. Therefore, it provides advice to prospective applicants about the other local authorities in the consortium, where applicants do not match the needs of Lambeth's children.

### 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, conducted by two inspectors. Field activities took place over four days, approximately.

Children benefit from a service which has a strong approach to matching them with suitable families. Recent recruitment activities to attract black adopters are being successful in addressing an identified and long-standing gap. Excellent access to medical advice and the good quality of training prepare adopters on the realities facing adopted children and families. There is sound scrutiny of assessment of suitability of adopters and of matching decisions, to ensure that they safeguard children and are likely to result in successful placements. Families are supported in maintaining stable placements and in enabling children in understanding their situation. Support for birth parents, post adoption, is good, with thoughtfully set and well monitored contact arrangements. However, pre-adoption support is insufficient and uptake of what is provided is minimal. This means that birth families do not benefit from support that meets their needs at some crucial times. The service is managed effectively, both operationally and strategically. There have been some excellent initiatives to address long-standing issues and historical concerns.

## **Improvements since the last inspection**

The previous inspection report, of June 2004, details seven requirements and 19 recommendations. The service has addressed the great majority of those.

The authority has re-designed the Statement of Purpose and the children's guide. Significant other documents and policies have been redrafted and updated. There are robust recruitment checks, to ensure suitability of staff and panel members, although the corporate procedure has not been amended to reflect the improved practice. Adopters are now notified in writing both of the panel's recommendations and of the agency's approval.

The strategy for recruiting adopters is now targeted to better meet the cultural and racial needs of the children for whom adoption is the care plan. There are managerial quality assurance mechanisms, which stakeholders consider to be effective and which underpin an improvement agenda. The authority regularly evaluates the post-adoption support services provided. Life story work is now mandatory and presented to panel. The service has a strategy for working with and supporting birth families, but uptake of support before placement is still minimal. The authority has met and exceeded the target for at least 20% of social workers to achieve a post qualifying child care award. Staff recruitment and retention policies are in place.

The authority has set up an appropriate system to monitor the process of access to adoption records.

## **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.

Children benefit from a very well thought-out and anti-discriminatory recruitment strategy, which is clearly focused towards attracting suitable adopters who can offer stable and permanent homes.

Race, culture and religion are given high emphasis. The impact of the various initiatives taken is carefully monitored and, in particular, their effectiveness in addressing the shortage of black adopters to meet the needs and increasing numbers of African-Caribbean children in the borough. Additionally, the recruitment strategy as a whole is subject to six monthly review. This ensures that the needs of children waiting for placements continue to be reflected.

Referral of children to the adoption team is effective in informing the service timely about individual children who may have a plan for adoption. Direct work is done with children and their feelings and wishes are explored. The authority provides age

appropriate information about how to complain. The independent reviewing officers, social workers or the authority's corporate parenting board, advocate for children by raising concerns on their behalf, if needed.

Family finding is successful in placing older children and those with complex needs; historical delays are being reviewed and resolved.

There is formal preparation of adopters, which addresses the issues that adopted children and their families are likely to encounter. Adopters find the content of such training useful and very much value the input of the health professionals. Critical evaluation is carried out after each preparation group, following feedback from participants, presenters and management scrutiny. For example, as a result of such evaluations, changes have been made regarding content and presentation style.

The authority conducts a range of checks to determine the suitability of adopters, including interviewing a number of appropriate referees. The home study incorporates a health and safety assessment, but the checklist used lacks some important references, for example to weapons or hanging cords.

As part of the authority's improvement agenda additional expertise has been directed to quality assurance of reports, before they are presented to panel. This, as well as specialist training and support for social workers, resulted in the quality of assessments, including child permanence reports, to be reasonably consistent.

The assessments of inter-county adopters are equally thorough. They are undertaken by an experienced external social worker and explore the unique equality and diversity challenges facing those adopting children from abroad.

Adopters are provided with written information about the matching process and about children whose needs they might be suitable to meet. An essential part of the matching process is a mandatory meeting with the agency medical adviser. This ensures that adopters are aware of and fully understand any physical or emotional health needs that the child may have. The authority is introducing additional, independent, medical advice for those adopters who would like a second opinion regarding specific issues that causes them concern.

Children are provided with child-friendly information, including photographs, from prospective adopters, about themselves, their homes, family and pets.

Adoption placement plans are developed with the full co-operation and involvement of the prospective adopters. These, along with the support plans, give a good view of where the responsibilities lie for meeting the different aspects of the child's needs.

Overall, a sound recruitment strategy, matching process and managerial review contribute well to safeguarding. This is also enhanced by the appropriate scrutiny by elected members, panel and decision maker.

Elected members take a keen interest and are conscientious in their corporate

parenting role.

There is a skilled, well prepared and robust adoption panel, effectively chaired, so that it acts as a significant, additional, quality assurance mechanism. The appointment of an independent and expert adviser has also contributed both to the effectiveness of the panel and to the quality of the reports presented. For example, the adviser offers professional development training; she participates in recruitment of new members, in annual appraisals and in reviews of panel functions.

Decision making is timely and set at an appropriate senior level, to enable an objective view of each case.

Information leaflets and guides help to ensure that those attending are aware of how the panel operates. Lambeth is re-instating periodic joint training for adoption social workers and panel members.

Robust vetting of staff is in place, to protect children, by ensuring that those working for the adoption service are qualified, experienced and suitable. However, the corporate procedure has not been amended, to fully reflect the practice.

Safeguarding procedures include the arrangements where historical abuse has been alleged and where allegations are made about prospective adopters. However, they do not allow for allegations about another party and as such the procedures do not place the child at the centre. The authority is reviewing this to address this gap.

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

The provision is good.

Adopters benefit from strong support to enable stable and permanent homes for the children placed with them.

Services provided include, for example: regular visits, email and telephone contacts; training in parenting skills; referral to other resources, such as: the British Association for Adoption and Fostering, other adopters and children's clubs.

Lambeth has an agreement, also, with an external agency, which offers support, including therapy and bespoke training, to adoptive parents and their children.

Adoption social workers maintain supportive contact after adopters' approval, right through the making of the adoption order and for as long as needed afterwards. There is joint working with children's social workers to aid placements to settle in and develop as a new family. In fact, post adoption social workers spend significant time working in the placement team, mainly to help to develop adoption support plans. This means that information sharing helps issues to be addressed promptly and is forging strong links between the teams.

Training meets prospective adopters' need to appreciate the realities of raising

adopted children, to promote the development of a positive self-identity and to maintain the child's heritage. Post approval training sessions are being introduced on subjects such as: children with disabilities; emotional, behavioural and mental health issues; first aid; working with children and young people who have been abused; telling a child that she or he has been adopted; living with an angry child and play-therapy.

A twice yearly newsletter is circulated to adopters; this also includes information such as training events at the inter-country adoption centre and information about OASIS (Overseas Adoption Support Agency).

An annual picnic event is held. The most recent one was a big success, despite poor weather. For example, an adopter confirmed this and called the day: 'brilliant, excellent'.

Disruption procedures are in place and are adequate.

There is a corporate parenting team, who co-ordinates regular consultation fora and participation activities for looked-after children; this is to ensure that they have real opportunities to express their views and influence the way services are delivered. There are plans for making some of these excellent activities more focused towards the needs of adopted children.

The adoption agency has very good access to specialist advisers and services appropriate to its needs. The adoption panel and social work team, for example, consider that they receive excellent medical and legal counsel. Mandatory meetings are held between the medical adviser and adopters, to ensure that they understand any implications of a child's health and disability. Specialist advice is offered on issues of race, culture and also about matters relevant to adopting children from other countries. There is easy access to children's mental health services.

Training sessions are delivered by the 'looked-after children health team' to adopters, health visitors and school nurses. Strong links have been forged between the designated nurse and the development lead for children and young people. After placement, independent reviewing officers continue to receive copies of children's health assessments, so that they can challenge any outstanding issues.

Adopters are enabled to gain a good understanding of the local authority's duties, so that, with this knowledge, they can advocate effectively for the child. For example, the service holds sessions about education transfers and admission choices for children. This has resulted in 80% of children getting their first choice of schools. Adopters receive relevant information and updates on the availability of nursery education in their local area. There is access to the educational psychology service and to the specialist team helping to manage issues of school exclusions and integration.

Lambeth has plans for developing advocacy services, for prospective adopters, to promote the education and learning needs of children from specific groups.



Overall there is a strong strategic approach in Lambeth both to increasing access to health care for looked-after children and to raising children's educational achievements. Therefore, adopters and children benefit from appropriate, specialist guidance.

Services are offered to a wide range of people touched by adoption and include: support to adopted adults who wish to trace their birth families; birth records counselling and direct contact between adopted children and their birth families.

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

The provision is satisfactory.

There is commitment, acted upon in practice, to supporting birth parents, which is particularly evident after adoption is completed. Birth parents, overall, receive a service that recognises the life-long implications of adoption and that continues as long as required. Lambeth works with an external post-adoption centre to provide independent counselling and support to birth families. Although take-up is low, this has been recognised with the creation of a small team to focus on such matters.

However, the stage at which birth parents' counselling commences is too late. Lambeth does not take a strong enough approach as soon as adoption has been identified as a possible plan for the child. Overall, pre-adoption work with birth relatives is insufficient and uptake of what is available is minimal. This means that birth families do not benefit from services that effectively involve them at a key time in the adoption process. Birth families may contribute to the adoption plans, but the method for obtaining their views is not pro-active in all cases.

Direct contact arrangements are very thoughtfully set out and supported. Adopters acknowledge this. For example, one adopter said that she was 'really happy' with what was offered. Another arrangement indicated a very considerate approach to ensuring that the birth mother would get the most out of the session, while respect was shown to all parties. The adopter involved felt that what was provided to her and to the birth mother well met all the expectations. She portrayed the worker as thorough and sensitive to all parties' needs. A birth relative, in describing the contact arrangement, said that 'a good time was had by all'. She appreciated that, although the venue was a bit far away, Lambeth got her a taxi.

Lambeth arranges birth parent and adopter meetings, which are good arenas for the sharing of information and for reassuring birth parents about the family with whom their child will be living. The agency supports all parties in attending good-bye contacts.

Letter box contact is effectively managed and adopters' letters are thoughtfully written.

There are good arrangements in place regarding life-story books, as important

means for maintaining children's heritage.

Birth records counselling is undertaken in a very sensitive way.

Services are based on users' needs, identified by a professional assessment.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

Those touched by adoption benefit from committed and qualified staff, who take their work and responsibilities seriously and want good outcomes for children.

The service is managed effectively, both operationally and strategically, with sound systems in place for monitoring its activities and ensuring performance. There have been a number of excellent initiatives in response to long-standing issues and some significant historical concerns, which are now being addressed. For example: retention bonuses have been introduced for social work staff; regular and frequent permanency planning meetings are helping to ensure consistency in tracking the progress of adoption cases and to minimise drift. Such meetings are chaired at senior level and are multi-disciplinary. Careful evaluation is made of the ethnicity of all children referred for adoption and of prospective adopters. Religion, sexuality, disability or trans-cultural factors are also considered. Within the field social-work teams, good effort is made to ensure that equality and diversity issues are thoroughly explored, sometimes through same culture, religion or race workers. This helps to promote a sense of identity among the children and adoption applicants. Good efforts are made to recruit same sex prospective adopters.

There is a stable staff group. Although some are agency or locum workers, they are all of long standing. Regular supervision, both formal and informal, is in place and even more senior managers are described as being approachable. Post adoption workers, when carrying out particularly specialised tasks, receive additional, expert, bi-annual supervision. There is effective administrative support.

Social workers say that management encourages them to take part in courses relevant to their roles. This includes access to both internal and external training and the opportunity to study for a post-qualifying award. Social work staff receive updates in safeguarding, but administrative staff have not yet been included in child protection courses appropriate to their role.

Overall, staff very much like working for Lambeth. They say that their work is challenging, but manageable; that they feel supported; that they are able to raise

concerns, confident that they would be heard and not dismissed as personal issues; that any matter that might have a negative effect for children is taken seriously and acted upon. Staff are familiar with the whistle blowing policy in place. Staff also commented, for example: 'This is one of the best teams I ever worked in'; 'It is a new Lambeth'; 'I am passionate about working for Lambeth.'

There is a strong, integrated, multi-disciplinary approach to corporate parenting. There are very good arrangements to ascertain children's views and to use consultation as a means to develop and improve services to all children.

There is a range of information in place for adopters, which is clear about the process and implications of adoption on all parties and which includes the eligibility criteria. There are written arrangements regarding the financial support scheme for adopters.

The work of the service is underpinned by a Statement of Purpose and relevant policies. These have been reviewed and updated in line with developments in the practice and with statutory guidelines. The children's guides are child focused and have been developed in consultation with children.

Records are generally well maintained, with due regard for confidentiality. There are clear procedures regarding access to case records.

The premises are secure and well equipped to support the work of the adoption team. Consumers commented that it is, at times, very difficult to access the service by telephone.

## 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
7	provide counselling, information and ascertain birth parents' wishes, so far as it is reasonably practicable, as soon as adoption is identified as a possible plan for the child. (The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, Regulation 13)	01/03/2009

## Recommendations

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

- review the health and safety checklist for prospective adopters. (National Minimum Standard 4)
- amend the corporate procedure, regarding recruitment checks for staff, to reflect the expectations of the adoption service. (National Minimum Standard 19)
- review safeguarding procedures to ensure that they include allegations about persons other than adopters. (National Minimum Standard 32)
- ensure that administrative staff receive child protection training appropriate to their role. (National Minimum Standard 23)