

The London Borough of Greenwich 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 adoption team for the London Borough of Greenwich currently have their office premises on Powis Street in Woolwich. The agency provides a comprehensive adoption service in line with its statutory responsibilities. This includes matching and placing children in need of adoptive families; recruiting, preparing, assessing and approving adoptive families, both for domestic and inter-country adoptions; providing assessments for, and a variety of, post adoption support to adoptive children and families; counselling and support to birth families; assistance and counselling to adopted adults who wish to see their birth records; intermediary services including tracing and reunions; assistance with indirect and direct contact arrangements and court reports on non-agency adoptions.

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.

The London Borough of Greenwich provides a strong adoption service to children and adopters. It has robust arrangements in place to recruit, prepare, assess and approve appropriate families, which is further promoted by a committed and experienced adoption panel. Formalised systems are in place to ensure that children who need adoptive families are placed quickly and appropriately to promote the best possible outcomes.

Arrangements for providing support to adopters are strong, with a systematic approach to the assessment of needs. There are a range of services available to meet those needs, including a specialist, multidisciplinary Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) for looked after children which can respond quickly, again with a range of support.

The weakest part of the agency are the services for birth parents, the reports on children and the arrangements for providing children with life story books in a timely way.

The management and organisation of the agency are good. Managers and staff are qualified, knowledgeable, committed and experienced. They are well-supported and have access to appropriate training. There are good working relationships between the placing social workers and the adoption team, the latter provide good support and advice to the children's social workers, which is much appreciated.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection, the agency had three actions and 18 recommendations. The only outstanding action is the provision of alternative premises for the adoption service, which has a date for completion of 31 October 2009. Management have given an assurance that plans are already in place to address this within the next 18 months. All the recommendations have been attended to satisfactorily. Further improvements include joint training on adoption issues, more formalised processes in relation to matching and introductions and improved working with the consortium.

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 demonstrates a clear understanding of the needs of children who require adoptive families. There is a written recruitment strategy which addresses how to meet those needs, the evidence provided indicates that the agency is successful in recruiting and approving adoptive families who are from a variety of cultures and backgrounds. Very few adopters wait for placements, which indicates that the agency recruits the right families for its children. Children generally do not wait long for adoptive families, this is achieved by the use of inter-agency placements when Greenwich adopters are not suitable. 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.

There is a formal, thorough process for preparing, assessing and approving adopters. Two social workers undertake an initial interview with interested parties, the team then decides whether to take up the application and the applicants are then invited to take part in the assessment group. Adopters gave good feedback about this group and felt it prepared them well. They were clear it was an integral part of the assessment and was more experiential than the usual preparation groups which adoption agencies run.

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. The full range of checks and references

are taken up and a health and safety questionnaire is completed. This has recently been revised to include areas such as guns, weapons and poisonous plants. This process ensures as far as possible that the adoptive parents are appropriately safe to care for children.

Adopters receive clear information about the matching process post approval. They are encouraged to prepare family books which are child-specific, to enable the child to learn about them in an appropriate way. There is a very good process for matching children with adoptive families, through a number of formalised meetings which address the needs of the child and the type of family which would meet those needs. Prospective adopters receive full information to enable them to make an informed decision about whether the child is right for them and at all stages of the process they are able to express any anxieties and withdraw if necessary. Adopters confirmed that the agency was very clear in giving them permission to back out at any stage with no reflection on their abilities as adoptive parents. These processes and the attitude of the staff of the agency, promote secure and appropriate placements.

The agency has an appropriately constituted adoption panel which is underpinned by a comprehensive set of policies and procedures. There is a well-established pattern of adopter attendance and both staff and adopters confirmed that they were made welcome and asked appropriate questions. Adopters said that their social worker prepared them well for the panel so it was not quite as daunting an experience as it could be. The adoption panel is chaired by an experienced, independent person who has proven abilities in this area. Panel members have a good range of personal and professional experience and reflect a number of different cultures. All panel members have appropriate checks in place and have undertaken an induction, training and appraisal. They are well prepared for the panel, having read the papers in advance, pick up relevant issues and ask appropriate questions. There are good mechanisms for the feedback of any issues of concern to the agency. This promotes robust recommendations which inform the decision-making.

The panel meets regularly, with the facility to hold extra panels if necessary, and there is no evidence that children's plans are delayed through 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, the minutes are full and reflect the discussion and the reasons.

The agency decision is made in a timely way, based on the availability of full information. Adopters receive the notification of the agency decision swiftly, but there is no evidence to show that birth parents receive this in a consistent manner in relation to their child's approval for adoption or their match.

The agency is managed and staffed by appropriately qualified, suitable people. Recruitment practices are robust and all the necessary checks are carried out. The adoption team demonstrates that they are knowledgeable, experienced, committed and hard-working but are not complacent. They are keen to improve the service and their own professional development.

The agency has safeguarding procedures in place which relate to all looked after children but do not make specific reference to children placed for adoption or receiving adoption support services. There is a programme of safeguarding training for staff and they confirmed that this is an area which is promoted.

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 it's 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 regular workshops provided by CAMHS, the adoption team and a bi-monthly support group. In addition, there is a newsletter sent to all adopters in the area, social events, a children's group through the consortium and direct work with children and families, including theraplay. The latter can be undertaken by one of the social workers who is trained in this area. 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 to enable an adopter to remain at home for longer than anticipated to meet the needs of the child. This also allows the adopters to buy in other services to assist and support them with the task of parenting an adoptive child with challenging needs.

Children placed for adoption receive a very good service from CAMHS, which has a multi-disciplinary team, including specialist attachment 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, provide consultation to adopters and staff, training for schools and adopters and support groups. Adopters commented that they worked well together and felt it was a 'joined up' service.

Legal and medical advice is of a good standard; the medical adviser is extremely good at speaking with adoptive parents to enable them to consider the medical implications of caring for an adoptive child. 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 satisfactory.

There is evidence to show that the agency involves birth parents in planning for their child and their views are recorded on the Child Permanence Report (CPR). However the CPRs are of a variable quality; wording is not always written as sensitively as it should be, inaccuracies and typographical errors exist and amendments are not always made as requested. The result of this is that an inappropriately worded CPR may be the document available to the child once they reach adulthood. This issue is regularly commented upon by the adoption panel and raised with the agency at the quarterly meetings by the adoption panel chairperson. The agency has tried to address this through training, through the panel adviser and through management meetings, but as yet, this has not had the desired effect of improving the situation to an acceptable level.

Birth parents have access to a choice of counselling and support service which is independent of the child's social worker. They have the choice of speaking with a social worker from the adoption team or a completely independent service. Currently, the child's social worker refers the birth parents to the adoption team if they wish to receive a service, the take up is not particularly high. The adoption team are keen to look at ways to improve this and other aspects of support to birth families such as social events or groups.

Life story work and the provision of the life story book for the child is also of a variable standard. Social workers are aware of the importance of this but there is evidence that children do not receive their life story book at an appropriate time. In one instance, this had still not been received eight months after the adoption order was made. In one later life letter seen, the date of the child's adoption order was incorrect and this lack of attention to detail in such a significant document is poor practice.

On a more positive note, the arrangements for contact between children and their birth relatives is good. The agency has a robust letterbox system with plans to develop this further by addressing in a more formalised way what happens when a child reaches 18 years old and by developing a database and reminder system. The current system operates well, however, and the social worker offers guidance with letter writing and other support which leads on from the personal contact with birth relatives. The agency also facilitates direct contact between children and their birth families where this is seen to be in the child's best interest and birth parents gave very positive feedback on the work undertaken with birth siblings in different placements.

The post adoption social workers offer services to adopted adults and birth relatives in relation to access to records, tracing, intermediary work and reunions. As a member of this team is a trained counsellor in addition to being a social worker, this gives an added dimension to the work which is undertaken. The consortium offers a support group for adopted adults in a central location.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The Statement of Purpose and underpinning policies and procedures provide a clear framework for the operation of the agency and are child-focussed. There are two Children's Guides, geared to meeting the needs of both older and younger children. These guides, combined with other resources available, enable children's social workers to have appropriate tools for working with children to help them understand adoption and move on to their new families.

The written information sent to enquirers is clear and gives transparency to the adoption process. The agency does not hold information meetings but enquirers receive information about the children waiting and the process through a thorough initial interview with two social workers, which fulfils the same function. Applicants can be prioritised to meet the needs of children waiting.

The agency is well managed at all levels by people who demonstrate commitment, knowledge, skill, experience and enthusiasm to provide a good service for children. Management arrangements are clear; roles and responsibilities are well-defined, lines of accountability are well-established, mechanisms for communication are effective and staff are well supported. Staff feel that the stability of the Council contributes to the provision of services which are based on need and there are good mechanisms in place to ensure the executives are informed of the activities of the adoption agency.

All staff receive regular and effective supervision from their managers. The adoption team, who are very experienced, 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 is more difficult to access because of the cost, but the manager is committed to supporting her staff in accessing this where possible. The administrative support is good but some of the equipment is old, which impacts on their efficiency at times.

The adoption team, which provides a wide range of services to adoptive families, including post adoption support, is small. The quality of the service they provide is good but there are some delays in allocating social workers to undertake assessments on potential adopters and services to birth families could be developed further. The staff are committed and enthusiastic in wanting to improve and develop their service, but at the moment, do not have any time to do this. They are

extremely well valued by the children's social workers, who describe them as very helpful, accessible and always at the end of a telephone to provide advice when needed.

The London Borough of Greenwich is said by staff to be a good employer. Many of the staff have worked there for a number of years, some have returned to it and feel it is supportive and child-focussed. It gives good opportunities for career development, offers flexible working and the induction for staff from overseas is very thorough. It has good policies in place to encourage staff retention such as keyworker housing, 'golden hellos' and retention bonuses.

Adopters case records are well-organised, indexed and it is easy to access information. They contain evidence of file audit and case supervision. Children's adoption files are now established with an index which identifies the documents needed for an adoption file. This index lacked detail in parts and some documents were not in some of the files inspected. For example, health information on parents and notifications of decisions. Some inaccuracies in all types of files were identified such as incorrect dates. Arrangements for accessing case records are clearly laid out and all records are stored with appropriate security and confidentiality.

Personnel files demonstrate a rigorous approach to the recruitment and selection of staff. Likewise, files on panel members contain all the required information.

The premises from which the adoption service operates are poor; they are not accessible, they are inappropriate for the service as they do not offer pleasant interviewing facilities and are not well maintained. However, there are definite plans to move the service to alternative premises within the next 18 months. The disaster recovery plan does not address the safeguarding and back up of records.

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
13	ensure that birth parents receive the agency decision in writing, both in relation to the child's approval for adoption and the match (Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 Regulation 19 and 33).	28/11/2008

Recommendations

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

- continue to work on improving the quality of CPRs to ensure amendments are made when requested and that they are suitable documents for the adopted child when they reach adulthood (National Minimum Standard 7)
- ensure that life story books are prepared in a timely way and that significant documents, such as later in life letters, are accurately written (National Minimum Standard 7)
- amend the current safeguarding procedures to ensure they comply fully with regulation 9 of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England)(Amendment) Regulations 2005 (National Minimum Standard 32)
- review the staffing of the adoption team to enable them to develop and improve their services (National Minimum Standard 21)
- improve the systems for ensuring that case records contain all the required information and are accurate in their recording of this (National Minimum Standard 25)
- ensure the disaster recovery plan addresses the safeguarding and backup of records (National Minimum Standard 29).