

Harrow Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Rosemary Chapman / Mike Stapley
Type of inspection	Key

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Responsible individual	
Date of last inspection	13/09/2005

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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 Harrow has a unique arrangement in place for discharging its responsibilities in relation to its adoption service. It has a partnership arrangement with Coram, a Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA), who undertakes the preparation, assessment, approval and support of domestic adopters and family finds for children for whom adoption is the plan. Harrow retains its responsibilities for placing children, undertaking the assessments of those who wish to adopt from overseas and for non-agency adoptions. It is also responsible for providing post adoption support, birth records counselling and intermediary services, which are undertaken by the Adoption, Support and Kinship (ASK) team.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

The London Borough of Harrow, working in partnership with Coram, places children without undue delay in appropriate adoptive families. There are sound arrangements in place which facilitate this process and prevent drift. The adoption panel provides an independent and robust scrutiny of the work of the agency and the decision making is timely and thorough. The recruitment and selection of staff is sound but there are shortfalls in the systems for the recruitment of sessional workers and the renewal system for Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks. The ASK team is recently formed and some of the staff have limited direct family placement experience.

The support to adoptive parents is not well developed at present and a more strategic approach to this has not been implemented. However, there are good partnership arrangements in place to provide a multidisciplinary service to looked after children and this can be accessed by children who are adopted. The agency benefits from good and accessible medical and legal advice to inform its work.

There is a lack of a systematic approach to the support of birth parents both before and after the adoption of their child. They are involved in the plans, encouraged to contribute information about themselves and their family and arrangements for indirect contact are facilitated through a robust letterbox system. Life story work is variable, although the agency has invested in a post to provide support and training for staff and improve this area.

Management arrangements are good. The agency is staffed by a permanent staff group who feel well supported and who receive regular supervision and good training opportunities. There are some shortfalls in record keeping in relation to the files on sessional staff.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the previous inspection there were six actions and 15 recommendations made. All the actions have been addressed, as have the majority of the recommendations. Those which remain include updating the policies and procedures, developing and implementing a clear strategy for working with and supporting adopters and developing and implementing a strategy for working with birth parents.

The agency has made significant improvements in the service it provides to children who have adoption as a plan. At the previous inspection, there were significant delays in placing children with adoptive families. Addressing this shortfall has been the priority and it is very positive to note that children are now placed quickly and appropriately. The partnership with Coram has been very effective in enabling Harrow to fulfil its statutory responsibilities to the children. The management of the agency are to be commended on looking at alternative and innovative methods of addressing the challenges they had. The other significant improvement has been in the staffing of the service. Three years ago, most of the social workers were temporary staff and there were vacancies. Due to the implementation of the workforce strategy, staff are now permanent and there are very few unfilled posts. These changes have led to the provision of a more effective and safe service. Having prioritised these two key areas and effected positive change, Harrow can now address the remaining shortfalls.

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 London Borough of Harrow, hereafter referred to as Harrow, entered into a partnership arrangement with Coram, a Voluntary Adoption Agency, 18 months ago. This arrangement means that Harrow delegate the responsibility for the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters to Coram, who are also responsible for family finding for Harrow children who have adoption as a plan. As Coram is also inspected by Ofsted, and has to comply with the same National Minimum Standards (NMS) and legislation, their practice is subject to their own agency's inspection in October 2008 and detailed in that inspection report.

There are good systems in place for alerting Coram to the children who may require an adoptive family. Permanency tracking meetings, which are held monthly, ensure that the partnership manager is fully aware of this at an early stage and is able to share this information with her agency and start the process of family finding, albeit very tentatively. The arrangement with Coram allows for all adoptive families approved by their agency to be considered for Harrow children, which significantly

increases the choice and range available. However, if Coram does not have an appropriate family, there is evidence which shows that other agencies are approached and their families considered. These developments have addressed the delay for children which was apparent at the previous inspection. The evidence shows that good matches are made. Systems have been developed which promote this; children's needs are assessed and detailed and a selection meeting is held to consider which families can best meet those needs. Siblings are placed together where appropriate, and assessments undertaken which address whether placing together or apart is in their best interests. Likewise, a child's cultural, religious and ethnicity needs are considered and children placed in families which meet those needs where possible. The views of birth parents and children are canvassed and taken into account.

Harrow undertake the assessment of applicants who wish to adopt from overseas. These applicants attend an information session and preparation course which is run by the Inter-country Adoption Centre (IAC), which is a registered Adoption Support Agency (ASA), subject to its own inspection and report. Adopters comment that the preparation is thorough and useful. The assessments of applicants seen as part of the inspection were variable in quality and level of analysis; some were lacking depth and rigour. All checks and references, apart from employer references are taken. The manager confirmed that it is Harrow's policy to take a reference from all employers but this was not consistently evident in the cases inspected. Second opinion visits are not carried out. The health and safety questionnaire did not refer to weapons, poisonous plants or hanging cords, although the issue of guns and pets are addressed.

Harrow has its own adoption panel which considers (in relation to this inspection) the approval of children for adoption, their match with a suitable family and the approval of inter-country adopters. The work of the adoption panel is underpinned by comprehensive policies and procedures. There is a well-established practice of prospective adopters being invited to the panel both for their approval and match. They are well-prepared for this by their social worker and receive a useful booklet about the panel process with their invitation to attend. They are also encouraged to comment on their experience through an evaluation form, which is sent to them directly. Adopters spoken with described their experience at panel as a positive one.

The panel is properly constituted, with panel members who contribute a range of personal and professional experience, and is chaired by a very experienced and knowledgeable chairperson. Panel members have an induction, receive a pack of information and observe a panel before they become voting members, to ensure they are equipped for the task. This is supplemented by training days and legal briefings to maintain their up to date knowledge.

The panels are well organised and held regularly to ensure there is no delay for children. Social workers confirmed they can always get a panel date when they need to and felt that both the panel administrator and professional adviser are very helpful in enabling them to be prepared with appropriate paperwork. All the written information is sent out in good time and with appropriate security, so that panel

members have time to read and consider it prior to the panel meeting. The minutes are thorough and reflect the discussion and their reasons for the recommendation. There is an effective process in place to ensure the agency decision is made in a timely and considered way and that notifications are sent to birth parents and adopters which inform them of the decision.

The recruitment procedures for the employment of the manager and permanent staff are robust and evidence of references and appropriate checks are in place in their personnel files. However, the system for the renewal of CRB checks is not effective and one member of staff did not have a current CRB check taken out by Harrow, although a CRB check from another agency was in date. This was discussed at a senior level during the inspection and more robust arrangements are to be implemented to prevent this happening again. The files of sessional staff did not contain evidence of robust recruitment and selection procedures.

The Adoption, Support and Kinship team has been recently established to undertake assessments of inter-country adopters, provide support services to adoptive families and those affected by adoption. The other work they undertake is not covered by this inspection. Currently the majority of this team do not have prior direct experience of family placement work and thus may not meet the requirements of the regulations in respect of the preparation of reports. A post of senior practitioner is being advertised to address this shortfall.

The agency use the London Safeguarding Board procedures, supplemented by their own, which inform staff of the action to take if allegations are made about children placed for adoption. All staff have had training in this area to promote the protection and safeguarding of children.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is satisfactory.

Adoptive parents in Harrow receive support from either Coram (if they are approved by Coram) or the ASK team in Harrow. Harrow has responsibility for the financial support of adoptive parents of Harrow children and has developed an assessment process for the adoption allowance system. All adoptive families have an adoption support plan which highlights their current and potential needs and this is considered at the permanency planning meetings, along with contact issues.

Post adoption support is not well developed. The ASK team has been recently formed and a consistent post adoption support strategy has not yet been implemented. There was evidence that adopters felt more could have been done to assist them, the service was more a 'sign-posting' one to other services and was not particularly effective. Currently, there are no newsletters, no social events, no support groups for adopters or children and no workshops or training opportunities. The ASK team are looking at some aspects of this through either their own efforts or through the consortium arrangements. Support which Coram adopters receive is addressed in their inspection report.

There are good partnership arrangements in place for looked after children, addressed by the life chances forum and a multi-disciplinary team of professionals, which include psychological and educational support. Senior management expressed confidence that those arrangements are available for adopted children also and intend to amend the terms of reference to ensure this is enshrined in writing as well as practice.

The agency has access to medical and legal advice. This is accessible and helpful. The advice, both medical and legal, which is available to the adoption panel is extremely good and valued by the panel members. Advice and information in relation to inter-country matters is available from the IAC, who also provide training. This is accessible and of a high standard.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency makes every effort to involve birth parents in the plans for the adoption of their child. Evidence which supports this finding is available in the Child Permanence Reports (CPR), some of which have the appropriate section completed by the birth parent themselves. If a birth parent requires support independent of the child's social worker, this can be spot purchased. However, this arrangement is not effective as it relies on the child's social worker discussing the options with them, and the take-up is very low. The CPRs seen are of a variable quality and some contained typographical errors and inaccurate information. These are frequently identified by the adoption panel and a log of amendments required is maintained by the panel adviser, who monitors this process. The agency is clear that it expects the social workers to make the amendments and will take action if these are not done.

The agency has a member of staff in the post of life story and letterbox co-ordinator, which is a means of promoting this aspect of work. Staff felt this was helpful; she provides training in life story work to foster carers and social workers, has resources available to assist and will provide advice and support. However, the life story book seen did not provide a narrative of the child's life story and was a photographic collection. One adopter said she had not received a life story book for her adopted child and social workers appear to rely heavily on foster carers to undertake this task, whilst recognising its importance.

The agency understands the importance of maintaining a child's heritage and this is facilitated through a robust letterbox system. Contact arrangements are discussed at the permanency planning meetings and the letterbox coordinator is responsible for drawing up the contracts. She provides guidance leaflets, advice, support and assistance in letter-writing, has a pro-active reminder system to facilitate the smooth running of contact arrangements and reads and photocopies all contacts. Direct contacts are supervised by an external agency at present but this has been reviewed and will be taken over by Harrow staff in the near future.

The ASK team are responsible for providing post adoption support to birth relatives and adult adoptees, including birth records counselling and intermediary services. These are not well developed at present and there is no evidence of a pro-active approach to advertising the services which can be provided.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency has a written Statement of Purpose which reflects the services they provide. The policies and procedures which underpin this are in need of updating to reflect the new arrangements and the manager is aware of this. The Children's Guide is suitable for younger children and is used, along with other resources, to assist a child understand why they are moving to an adoptive family.

The information for domestic adopters is provided by Coram and there is a link on the Harrow website which directs enquirers to that agency. This information is also provided in a letter sent to any enquirers. Information which outlines the process is sent to those people wishing to adopt from overseas and adopters spoken with said this was useful and informative.

The nominated manager of the adoption service is appropriately skilled, qualified and experienced in adoption and childcare but does not have a management qualification. Arrangements are in place to address this. There are clear lines of responsibility and accountability throughout the agency.

There have been significant improvements in the staffing arrangements since the previous inspection. A robust workforce strategy was implemented and has been effective. The staff group throughout the service consists of permanent employees and there are very few vacancies. Staff feel that Harrow have made real efforts to improve the situation which was in existence three years ago. They now feel well-managed and supported, their caseloads are monitored to ensure they do not become overloaded and they receive regular supervision. Training is available and they are encouraged to attend to improve their practice. The partnership arrangements with Coram have been of benefit in this area as the agency provides training for staff which Harrow staff can access. Many of the staff have undertaken the post qualification award and safeguarding training. The level of clerical and administrative support is appropriate and the administrative staff are described as 'fantastic' by some social workers. These changes and the current arrangements have resulted in staff feeling that Harrow is a good Borough in which to work. They have seen real improvements in the stability of the workforce and their conditions of service, including support, flexible working and salaries.

There are systems in place for ensuring that the executive side of the Council are kept informed of the workings of the adoption agency and the outcomes for children. Arrangements include regular meetings with officers, regular reports on performance indicators and reports to a bi-monthly corporate parenting panel. Councillors interviewed demonstrated a child-focussed approach to, and an awareness of, their responsibilities.

The agency maintains electronic files for adopters and children, although it plans to keep a hard copy version of the child's adoption file to ensure that sensitive and important documents, including those provided by or written on by birth parents are not destroyed. Files are audited and there is evidence of case supervision decisions on the files seen. Case recording and access to records are underpinned by written policies and procedures and the arrangements for the storage of files, both electronic and hardcopy, are secure.

The files which are maintained for permanent members of staff contain all the required information, although are badly constructed and not well-ordered. However, the files for sessional members of staff do not contain the information which is required for recruitment and selection, nor do they have evidence of contracts, job descriptions and conditions of service. The panel members files show evidence of appropriate recruitment and selection processes, which have been further improved in the arrangements for the current recruitment of new panel members.

The premises from which the adoption agency operate, are very good. They are easily identifiable, well-situated, accessible, secure and have appropriate interviewing facilities. The archives are maintained by an external company but the arrangements for storage and retrieval are suitable and there is a business continuity plan in place which addresses the needs of the adoption service.

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	ensure that sessional staff are subject to the same robust recruitment and selection procedures as permanent members of staff (Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003, regulation 11)	12/12/2008
19	ensure that all staff who prepare reports on adopters or children meet the requirements of the regulations (The Restriction on the	12/12/2008

	Preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations 2005, regulation 3).	
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Recommendations

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

- ensure that all assessments are of an acceptable standard, are rigorous and analytical, and include references from employers and second opinion visits where necessary (NMS 4)
- develop the health and safety questionnaire to cover weapons, poisonous plants and hanging cords (NMS 4)
- implement the system for the renewal of CRB checks (NMS 19)
- implement a strategic approach to adoption support which ensures all adoptive families in Harrow receive a prompt and effective post adoption support service (NMS 6)
- implement a more effective service for birth parents which addresses the need for support independent of the child's social worker to be available from an early stage of the adoption plan (NMS 7)
- ensure that all children placed for adoption have a high quality life story book which clearly explains the reasons for their adoption (NMS 8)
- implement a more strategic approach to the support and services offered to birth relatives and adopted adults (NMS 9)
- ensure the policies and procedures reflect the current arrangements for the adoption service (NMS 1)
- ensure the nominated manager has a suitable management qualification (NMS 14)
- ensure that files on sessional staff contain all the required information (NMS 20.11 and 28.2).