

London Borough of Southwark Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	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 adoption agency of Southwark Council is constituted under current legislation and it is managed within the children's services department. It is a medium-sized agency that undertakes all required responsibilities in respect of the domestic adoption of children, including the recruitment, training, assessment and approval of adoptive parents. Arrangements are made to assess and approve people who wish to adopt children from overseas.

The agency works with a range of internal and external professionals to ensure that children's emotional and mental health needs are identified and are integral to the support offered to adoptive families. The agency operates from premises in the borough that are accessible by both public transport and car.

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 over five days by two inspectors.

Southwark delivers a solid and strong adoption service with elements of outstanding practice in all outcome areas inspected, but particularly so in relation to the support offered to adoptive families who commented, for example: 'Southwark was amazing and would recommend it to everyone'.

Adopters are welcomed without prejudice; they are highly satisfied with the way their assessment and preparation is conducted and with what is offered to enable placements to settle and develop into stable families.

Birth parents value the information and support received and the arrangements made regarding direct and indirect contact, to ensure that children maintain heritage.

There is excellent attention to individual needs and the positive promotion of diversity. This is especially so in relation to the identification and support of adoptive children's emotional and mental health issues and the successful work done to find adoptive placements for children with disabilities.

There is a commitment to improve the quality and timeliness of life story work. There is a sense that all are aware of its importance; the shortfalls are mainly caused by difficulty in finding the time to do it. No actions arise from this inspection. Recommendations are made regarding a number of records, applications from prospective adopters and the support to birth parents before adoption.

Improvements since the last inspection

Those actions and recommendations set at the key inspection of 2005 were followed up at the interim inspection conducted in January 2006 and found to have been complied with. There were no actions or recommendations arising from the interim inspection.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

There are no National Minimum Standards under this outcome.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Southwark provides successful placements for children and no disruptions have occurred in the last five years. The authority puts the needs of each individual child at the centre of the adoption process, thus ensuring that their welfare is promoted.

Management is clearly aware of children locally requiring adoptive families; there is a well thought out and anti-discriminatory recruitment strategy, aiming at attracting suitable adopters who can offer stable and permanent homes. Adopters receive a positive response to their initial enquiries and some gave examples to show how they were welcomed without prejudice.

The preparation of adopters is carried out in a formal way and it is tailored to meet their varying needs. Adopters highly value the preparation training and judge it to be: 'very good', 'open', 'honest', 'informative'. They said that the material and the speakers were excellent; that the training really brought home the difficulties that may be encountered; that issues of diversity were well addressed; and that it was made clear that the preparation group was part of the assessment process.

The authority conducts preparation training before accepting a formal application, so as to give prospective adopters the opportunity to be informed and reflect before applying. However, this is inconsistent with statutory guidance. It impinges on the right of adopters to refer to review mechanisms, should they be considered unsuitable at the end of the preparation course. It also distorts the timescales of assessments, which are taken from application.

Adopters consider the process of assessment thorough, inclusive and transparent. They said, for example, that the home assessment was appropriately probing; that the social worker was skilled at analysing the information provided and able to explore more where necessary; that overall it was a very professional service. They referred to the social worker as: 'always reliable, efficient and communicative'. They said: 'I really appreciated how the social worker supported us when we wanted to adopt and they were genuinely happy for us when the order came through'.

Generally assessments identify and analyse relevant issues and there is good exploration of diversity. However, the health and safety checklist does not record some useful details, such as, for example, hanging cords, except in relation to bedrooms, or poisonous plants. Also, it is not always apparent when issues have been addressed. Work histories do not include months, thus making it more difficult to identify if there are gaps.

There are effective systems to review and monitor family finding for individual children and such careful tracking leaves little scope for drift. The procedures governing matching, introductions and placement are robust and support excellent practices.

The children placed for adoption reflect the diversity of the communities in Southwark and many also have mixed heritages. The authority makes strenuous efforts to match children with families from similar backgrounds, but always with the child's timescale in mind, to avoid drift. Where exact matches cannot be found in a timely way, the agency ensures that additional arrangements are in place to meet all the child's needs; for example, regarding aspects of culture or ethnicity. Southwark has been successful in finding permanent solutions for children with complex needs and disabilities; particularly so through the support given to foster carers, to convert long-term placements into adoptions.

Adopters spoke highly of how introductions and matching are conducted and said: 'It is a superb, exceptional service'.

The two adoption panels are an effective, additional quality assurance mechanism regarding assessment of suitability of adopters and of individual matches. Members are child-focused, skilled at identifying gaps and thorough in their deliberations. There is very good conduct of panel chairing and of the panel advice function.

New panel members are vetted and there is a useful induction pack that includes relevant documents and information on how to complain. All members are appraised annually. There is periodic joint training for adoption social workers, field social workers and panel members. The arrangements for administering and managing panel business are well organised.

Decision-making is timely and demonstrates a considered and thorough approach to this crucial function. It is set at an appropriately senior level, so as to enable an objective view of each case and the capability to take action in response to issues arising.

The vetting of staff is robust and thus protects children, by ensuring that those working for the adoption service are suitable people and competent for their role. There have been occasional delays in renewing Criminal Records Bureau checks, but this is being addressed.

There are child protection procedures in place to guide staff regarding allegations of

abuse for children placed for adoption. However, it does not mention adoption support services. Additionally, the focus of the procedures is limited on the adopters as alleged abusers. They do not allow for allegations about another party and as such the procedures do not place the child at the centre.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Southwark ensures that those affected by adoption receive a service that is tailored to their particular need, identified by a professional assessment; the authority also uses specialist external services as appropriate. Adopted adults are offered birth record counselling and enabled to trace their birth families, with the option of a social worker acting as an intermediary and providing support.

Southwark takes very seriously its responsibility for preparing and supporting adopters to care for children placed with them, with excellent outcomes.

There is continuous analysis and review of how to best identify the immediate and longer term physical, emotional and mental health needs of children. Key to this is the research and direct work by the Carelink team, employing a variety of therapeutic techniques in working with children to understand what has happened and is happening in their lives. This work, conducted in partnership with the adoption social workers, has been effective in holding placements in some very complex and high risk situations and in preventing harm to children. The extensive research done gives indications of the likely issues associated with previous adversities and the best ways to help children overcome them. The medical adviser sees all potential adopters; she appraises them of the known implications of genetic loading, pre-birth and early life experiences and as to the probabilities for the child in question of having a predisposition towards mental ill health, addiction or substance abuse.

Southwark considers the adopters' ability to promote children's life chances via educational attainment and independent living skills. The assessment and preparation of prospective adopters encourage them to think about the long-term issues and how to meet the child's needs as he or she moves through adolescence. Through the adoption consortium the authority provides group support to young adopted teenagers and support has been provided to groups of adopters. Such groups assist family stability and their feedback contributes to the review of pre-approval training and support services.

The authority has developed a fast track system for all adopted children and adopters, with respect to health and education issues, with all referrals responded to by the adoption support team.

The education lead for adoption support has put emphasis in her work to ensure that schools account for the emotional needs of adopted children and to empower families. She provides continuity of information on children's performance and future needs. The authority is committed to expanding this area and is devoting more

resources to ensure that children's long-term educational needs are anticipated and planned for.

There are strong links with the housing department which have enabled re-housing, in some cases, to allow siblings to be placed together.

Adopters greatly value the support received and commented, for example: 'Adoption support was wonderful'; 'I had good support from the child social worker, she was advising me so much. Great support plan for the child, particularly for education'; 'The medical advisor was very good'. Attendance at the adoption celebration party has been growing each year. Adopters expressed much appreciation for the event, with comments such as: 'The annual party is a wonderful day, also for the siblings'.

A wide range of stakeholders highly commended the work of the specialist advisors. Panel advice is highly rated by both chairs. Legal advice has been said to be excellent, keeping members of the panel and social workers informed of legal matters and giving professional guidance to the recommendation and decision-making process. The medical advisor has been called outstanding by both professionals and adopters. Her dedicated approach ensures that the health needs of children are fully considered and communicated to prospective adopters before any match is agreed.

Southwark championed a financial support scheme to assist foster carers to adopt children placed with them long-term. This has enabled a significant number of children, mainly older or with complex needs, to be adopted since 2005.

Children's views are actively sought. For example, they are encouraged to make written contribution to their permanence report and are supported to attend matching panels, if appropriate to their age and development stage.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Southwark demonstrates a lifelong commitment to those touched by adoption, with a sensitive approach to ensuring that the welfare of all parties is promoted.

Birth parents are notified promptly and fully of all relevant decisions, regarding the adoption and are given advice about counselling and other relevant support services.

Birth mothers confirmed this directly. They knew that they could come back at any time for counselling and generally commented highly of the support and encouragement they had received. For example, they said: 'The great help from the child's social worker helped me feel better about adoption and less lonely'; 'Southwark was excellent, really warm and told me all the different options'; 'Meeting the adopters helped. Now I feel that the baby will be looked after properly'. There was much appreciation for the successful efforts in finding an adoptive parent who fully reflected the cultural and religious background of the birth mother.

Overall there is commitment to working with birth families, to involve them in planning and providing information for the future. This includes members of the extended family. Effort is devoted to trace absent fathers, including the use of external agencies, at times. The authority also uses voluntary adoption agencies for support and counselling to birth families. Uptake of support services before adoption is still minimal and there is lack of clarity amongst placing social workers about what services are available to birth parents.

Adopters appreciate the importance of maintaining heritage and a range of good practices are evident to enable this. For example, in one of the cases where a meeting was not appropriate, the adopters had written to the birth parents, introducing themselves and reassuring them that the child would be loved and well cared for.

Child permanence reports show that the wishes and feelings of birth parents are sought and documented. There is commitment to improving the quality and consistency of child permanence reports. For example, efforts have been made to assist the placing social workers with this task, offering them advice and consultation. The adoption panels are also involved in this, by highlighting shortfalls and ensuring that they are rectified. As a result, quality is generally good or good enough by the time of matching.

There is a similar commitment to improving the quality and timeliness of life story books and later in life letters and, from very recently, a draft of life story work is presented to panel at the time of matching.

The agency has a very robust letter box system with a large number of contacts, wholly operated by an experienced and qualified adoption social worker. This demonstrates a commitment to providing a high quality service. Direct contact arrangements are monitored and reviewed and there is flexibility to alter agreements to suit the changing circumstances and needs of the child.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

There are no National Minimum Standards under this outcome.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Those touched by adoption benefit from enthusiastic and experienced staff who feel valued by the organisation, believe that they can make a difference, are proud of what has been achieved and determined to do their best for children, adopters and birth families.

Staff consider Southwark to be a good employer, offering access to internal training, professional supervision and development opportunities. There is much respect for management, including from elected members. For example, some staff said that they came to work for Southwark because of the team manager's reputation. Staff very much appreciate that the service manager is visible, approachable and very knowledgeable. There is tight performance management and effective tracking mechanisms, to ensure that all aspects of the service are conducted according to expectations, based on clear quality standards and targets. There is scrutiny from senior management, the panels and elected members. The report to the corporate parenting committee is informative, but does not include support to adopters or birth parents.

Overall the adoption service is well managed by professionals who have the interest of children in mind. They are continuously reviewing practices, in the light of recent research. There is an accurate, honest and realistic self-assessment.

Sound working relationships have been established between the adoption team and the wider children's services, health, therapeutic services, education and housing. This promotes the safety and welfare of children and supports adoptive families in maintaining stability.

Staff are generally sufficient and well qualified to undertake the variety and complexity of the work. There is also good administrative support. However, pre-adoption work with birth parents requires greater emphasis, to ensure uptake. There is a sense that all staff are aware of the importance of the quality and timeliness of life story and the shortfalls are mainly caused by difficulty in finding the time to do it. While the support to adoptive families is excellent, the work is continuously increasing and staff are starting to feel overstretched.

There is much satisfaction from adopters, who refer to Southwark as 'reliable, efficient, communicative and overall a very professional service'. They made comments such as 'Southwark is a very good borough. Lots of initiatives' and 'very professional, got things done quickly, so child could be placed'. Such recognition is echoed by those birth parents who have engaged in the adoption process.

There is a comprehensive Statement of Purpose and children's guide, consistent with how the service is conducted in practice. There is clear information for both domestic and intercountry adopters regarding the process, eligibility criteria and, for intercountry adoption, the fees and legal processes relating to the country being considered. Therefore, those touched by adoption are informed of what they can expect and how they may complain. The minor inaccuracies in the Statement are being rectified.

Records are generally well kept, with children's adoption files, in particular, being of a high standard. The policy on the keeping of records has some inaccuracies regarding timescales and there is no evidence of regular auditing of electronic files. However, management is presently addressing this.

The arrangements made for archiving show proper regard for confidentiality, but there is no risk assessment in place.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. This is mainly discussed in the body of the report, under the specific outcome areas. In particular, the authority makes strenuous and usually successful efforts to ensure that individual needs and those arising from ethnicity and culture are met in matching. There is emphasis on consultation with children. The medical adviser gives sensitive guidance to applicants to assist in improving their individual health outcomes and to address the increased incidence of certain conditions in some ethnic groups. Through the fostering conversion scheme, championed by Southwark, adoption has been achieved for a significant number of older children and some with complex needs.

Staff training has focused on meeting the identity needs of adopted children. The adoption service is fully aware that good emotional health is affected by factors such as contact with birth families, decisions about sibling placements, identity, heritage and healthy attachments to the adopters. The adoption team works very well at supporting agreed contact. The integrated team of professionals puts much emphasis and research into attachment issues and how these might be affected for individual children. Children's educational and health needs are fully considered in the support plans. Close working with on-site mental health team for children allows speedy access for adopters and intercountry adopters who need assistance in this area

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- receive the application from prospective adopters before providing preparation training. (NMS 4)
- review what information is recorded in the health and safety checklist and in the work history of prospective adopters.(NMS 4)
- review safeguarding procedures to ensure that they include adoption support services and allegations about persons other than adopters. (NMS 32)
- review pre-adoption support services for birth families to increase uptake. (NMS 9)
- review the risk assessment and the disaster recovery plan for archived records. (NMS 29)