

# Corporation of London Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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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 service for the City of London is based within the Community and Children's Services team. This team operates a generic service and has only rarely placed children in its care for adoption. It does not recruit potential adopters, as its number of looked after children is very small. Should it be approached by potential adopters of British children, they will be referred to an alternative agency. Should the enquirers be interested in inter country adoption, the city will process appropriate applications by commissioning an external consultant to carry out the assessment process. Similarly, should pre or post adoption support services be required, they will also be commissioned from external agencies.

The city does not have its own adoption panel, but has an agreement with neighbouring London Borough of Hackney to use their panel. Several families have recently been approved for inter country adoption, and one looked after child has been placed for adoption since the last inspection.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This was an announced key inspection where all key standards were inspected. Being healthy and economic wellbeing were not inspected. This is a satisfactory service, with some good aspects. The adoption data sheet was completed and returned however the self assessment was not.

This inspection has resulted in five actions and six recommendations. The actions relate to the joint panel; staff recruitment; staff training; the statement of purpose and the children's guide. The previous inspection report had contained 10 actions and eight recommendations. A number of these remain outstanding, and relate to the joint adoption panel; policies and procedures; recruitment; the statement of purpose and staff qualifications.

### Improvements since the last inspection

This is the first inspection of this service under Ofsted. The last full inspection took place in 2005, and resulted in 10 actions and eight recommendations. Whilst the agency had responded with an action plan with timescales for meeting these actions, it could not be evidenced on this inspection that all requirements had been complied with. Those that remain outstanding relate to the need to establish an appropriate joint adoption panel, with a clear decision making process and better coordination of panel administration; to ensure that all the adoption policies and procedures meet the statutory requirements and the National Minimum Standards; to ensure that staff

recruitment processes are robust; and to develop the statement of purpose so that it covers all areas listed in the regulations.

### **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 agency operates a generic children's service, which incorporates its adoption functions. Due to the small size of the resident population in the city, and the proportionally small number of children for whom adoption is the plan, there are some aspects of the adoption service that the agency will commission from external agencies as and when they are required. One service that it does not directly provide is the recruitment of prospective adopters. Should they be approached by interested parties, they will refer them to alternative agencies. There are no children with adoption as the plan currently waiting for a match with adopters.

The agency does not carry out its own preparation programme or assessment of potential adopters. It uses the services of a nearby local authority, except for inter country adoptions when it will bring in an independent worker specially commissioned for the purpose. Feedback from potential adopters was mixed. Some was very positive however some had concerns over the length of time the assessment took, and the lack of information about the process of adopting a child from outside the United Kingdom. These concerns are more directly related to the often lengthy delays once approval has been granted by the local authority and the case is moved to the national and international level. Where the agency has commissioned an external assessor it has ensured that the assessments have been completed within the recommended eight month timeframe. The assessments have been thorough and well documented.

The agency uses leaflets produced by the British Agency for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) as due to the small number of children it places it would not be cost effective to publish their own.

The agency uses a neighbouring authority's adoption panel for approval of its plans for adoption, matching, and approval of adopters. The last Commission for Social Care (CSCI) inspection raised concerns over the arrangements between the two authorities, as the City of London did not have its own decision maker. The action plan sent to the Commission in response to the report stated that this would be reviewed and appropriate measures put into place. It also stated that the City's Director of Children's Services would be their decision maker. This was translated into a written agreement between the two authorities. At this inspection it was noted that this agreement had actually expired some 10 months earlier. Subsequent to this

inspection, information was received by Ofsted which indicated that a new agreement had been drafted. This agreement also stated that the city would have its own decision maker, and this role would be undertaken by one of its directors.

It could not be evidenced that this purported action had actually taken place. None of the staff spoken with, including at a senior level, could confirm who the city's decision maker was. Minutes from a panel in early 2008, at which a City of London case was presented, indicated that the decision regarding approval was not made by the city. Errors were noted in the pro-forma stating what the panel's recommendation was, and also in the letter sent to the applicants regarding the decision maker's decision. It was also noted that it had taken one month for this decision to be communicated in writing to the applicants.

The team manager has relevant experience in a social work setting and appropriate qualifications in social work. She has management experience and has attended training in this field but does not have a formal management qualification as illustrated in the National Minimum Standards. Responsibility for overseeing the adoption work within this generic team lies with a practice manager. Being a generic service, with very few adoption cases, does mean that staff, unless they have experience of adoption work prior to coming to this agency, rarely have the opportunity to develop skills in this highly specialised field.

Staff files examined contained most but not all of the expected information. There was no evidence that written references had been verified by telephone, and in one case the member of staff had not been asked why they had left previous employment where they worked with children. Files contained copies of social workers' registration with the General Social Care Council, but these were out of date. It did not appear that the agency was renewing Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks every three years as referred to in the National Minimum Standards.

The team manager has considerable experience in safeguarding. Staff are provided with regular safeguarding training. There have not been any incidents or allegations in the period since the last inspection. Staff have on-line access to policies and procedures with regard to safeguarding, including procedures specific to adoption and to dealing with any allegations of historical abuse that might be made.

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

The provision is good.

The agency does not provide direct post adoption support to adopters. It will purchase any services that are required as and when the need arises. At the time of this inspection there were no such support packages in place, and none had been requested. It should be noted however, that feedback from some adopters was very positive. The staff in the agency were highly spoken of and the service, limited as it was, was also highly regarded.

Whilst the agency does not directly provide an adoption service, it does ensure that

the services it commissions are appropriate and tailored to the individual needs of its service users. The team manager stated that these commissions are overseen, so as to ensure they provide what is required, and that it is of a satisfactory quality.

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

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency has no children to place at present, so it was not possible at the time of this inspection to assess the quality of its service to birth families. For the same reason it was not possible to obtain the views of birth families.

Records from previous adoptions indicated that the birth mother was involved in the adoption process, including the matching, and was offered both pre and post adoption support. In the event they are needed, the agency does have a supply of relevant leaflets from BAAF, including one entitled pregnant and thinking about adoption, one called if your child is being adopted and you don't agree) and one if your child is being adopted and you do agree.

The agency has very good information pack for looked after children. It is colourful, glossy, hardwearing (laminated) and contains lots of useful leaflets including wise up (sex advice); a very good set of cards on a key ring about bullying; access to records; a booklet about drugs, a guide called how old do I have to be, and a guide about asylum seekers prepared by young asylum seekers.

The agency has a number of procedures in place regarding adoption processes. The last inspection had resulted in a requirement for the agency to update its policies and procedures. The agency's action plan indicated that this would be done by mid 2006 however the procedures presented at this inspection were dated 2004, with a review date due in 2005.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is satisfactory.

The statement of purpose requires updating so that it contains all of the information listed in the regulations. It also needs to accurately reflect the service currently being provided by this agency. At present it states that the city does not have a dedicated adoption team, but that all staff working in this area have the necessary skills and

experience to assess potential adopters. This is misleading as when assessments are necessary, the work is commissioned to an external provider as the staff team does not currently have that expertise. At the time of this inspection the agency did not have a children's guide in place.

The agency makes it clear in its statement of purpose that it does not recruit adopters. Any potential adopters are referred to alternative agencies. If it is approached by potential inter country adopters and the decision is made to proceed with the application, the agency will commission an external social worker to carry out the assessment.

The adoption aspect of the generic workload is overseen by a practice manager. Therefore in this respect the lines of communication and accountability are clear. Monitoring of the quality of work produced by externally commissioned agencies, and also of any adoption work carried out in-house, is performed by the team manager and the practice manager leading in adoption. There was evidence on the case files examined of audits that had been carried out on the file contents.

The staff team is small, with a heavy reliance at present on agency staff. This was discussed with the director who stated that this was largely due to the effect of a re-organisation, adding that the agency is poised to recruit to two permanent social work posts in the near future. Due to the agreement with a neighbouring authority for the adoption panel, staff in this team are able to liaise, to a degree, with more experienced adoption colleagues in that authority, and seek advice and guidance from them. The staff team stated that they would welcome the opportunity for a closer working relationship. Staff are enabled to attend a variety of training courses, however specific training in adoption has not been widely available. This is an area which the agency needs to develop.

The agency maintains comprehensive and largely accurate case records for each child and prospective and approved adopters. These are well organised, with very good chronologies. Closed files are stored in the London Metropolitan Archives. There they are appropriately secure and safe from fire and from the elements.

The agency has a complaints procedure in place, and has also produced a complaints leaflet for children. This needs to be updated as it does not contain either the contact details for Ofsted or the Children's Right Director. There have not been any complaints in the intervening period between this inspection and the one carried out by CSCI in 2005.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. All staff spoken with felt that the agency addressed this in every aspect of its work. The director said that the agency has achieved level three of the Equality and Diversity standards and is working towards level four. In the limited areas this inspection was able to assess, it was felt that the equality and diversity agenda was of importance.

## **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 there is a clear agreement regarding the joint panel, which is followed in practice, and that the agency is clear who its decision maker is (Regulations 3, 19)	23/02/2009
19	ensure that all of the recruitment vetting and information required is obtained and made available for inspection (Regulations 6, 11)	23/02/2009
23	ensure that the manager undertakes from time to time such training as is appropriate to ensure they have the experience and skills necessary to manage the adoption service (Regulation 7)	31/03/2009
1	ensure that the Statement of Purpose is up to date, accurate and regularly reviewed (Regulation 1)	31/03/2009
1	ensure that the agency has an appropriate children's guide to adoption (Regulation 3)	31/03/2009

## Recommendations

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

- monitor the timescale in notifying applicants of the outcome of a panel hearing so as to ensure it keeps within good practice guidelines (NMS 13)
- enable the manager of the service to gain a management qualification (NMS 14)
- revise the children's complaints leaflet so it includes the contact details for Ofsted and the Children's Rights Director (NMS 24)
- repeat the CRB's for staff at three-yearly intervals (NMS 19)
- regularly review the agency's policies and procedures so as to ensure that they are fit for purpose (NMS 34)
- enable staff to liaise on a regular basis with colleagues in neighbouring authorities so as to gain further knowledge and experience in adoption procedures and practice (NMS 23)