

# London Borough of Newham Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	Paul Clark
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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	17/10/2008

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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 of the London Borough of Newham undertakes the recruitment, assessment, preparation, training and approval of adopters and the recognition, matching and placing of children who require adoption. The service plans and provides post-adoption support to approved adopters.

The council has a service level agreement with an independent social work agency to carry out the assessments of prospective adopters. It will direct applicants who wish to adopt from overseas to appropriate agencies specialising in inter-country adoption.

The council has a service level agreement with an approved agency to provide additional birth parent counselling. The service has a system to facilitate letterbox contact between birth parents and their adopted children where appropriate. Specialist workers within the adoption team support adopted people in finding their birth records and signpost them to an appropriate agency for intermediary work.

The office premises for the adoption service are located in a newly developed council building which is shared with the fostering team and the majority of placing social workers. Newham is part of the East London Adoption Consortium.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This announced full inspection of the adoption service found that a good standard of service provision is provided. Children are well matched with suitable adopters who have been well trained and prepared for their role. An experienced and dedicated team of practitioners are well managed and supervised by an efficient management team. The service enthusiastically draws on the diverse community it serves in effectively finding families, and achieves this for difficult to place children. The quality of work is generally well monitored.

The children's guides do not contain full information on how children can access helping agencies, also there are children who wait longer than 12 months to be placed with adopters. The quality of later life letters is not consistent.

### Improvements since the last inspection

The service now has a service level agreement with an external agency to carry out assessments of prospective adopters. The agency has a quality monitoring system which is further monitored by a manager of the adoption service and by second opinion visits by practitioners in the adoption team. This ensures that people caring

for vulnerable children are properly assessed. A comprehensive health and safety checklist of adopters' households has been constructed; this ensures that physical dangers to children are reduced. Written references for adopters and staff are now followed up by verbal confirmation and this follow-up check is recorded; this further ensures the protection of children from unsuitable persons. Life story work is now timely and of a good standard thus helping to ensure that children have a good knowledge of their background. An adoption support advisor has now been formally identified and this means that children and adopters have a clearer plan about the way that they will be supported by the service.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is not judged.

This outcome group is not looked at in adoption inspections.

### **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is good.

The service has a clear and determined regard for the safety of children. Children are helped to feel safe through the provision of a range of information documents explaining the adoption service as these contain the contact details of helping agencies.

Placing social workers produce excellent child permanency records which detail how children's needs will best be met by adoption; these are presented to the adoption panel for consideration and recommendation. Children are consulted about their feelings about proposed placements at various stages of the adoption process. If they are of an appropriate age, children are seen alone by their social worker during the early weeks of placement and asked if they feel safe and happy in the placement.

Children benefit from thorough assessments of potential adopters which are carried out by social workers from an external agency; the adoption service have a service level agreement with this agency. Children are kept safe by the appropriate counselling out of unsuitable applicants. There are outstanding quality monitoring systems in place which ensure that assessments of potential adopters are timely, accurate and of a good quality.

The adoption panel and family finders within the adoption team ensure that children are suitably matched with prospective adopters. In the first instance, an adoption place for a child will be looked for within Newham, or with a member authority of the consortium. Children are also helped to be found an early adoption place by having their name placed on the national adoption register at the earliest opportunity. Members of the adoption team have specific responsibility for the recruitment of potential adopters with a particular focus on meeting the needs of those groups of children who may be more difficult to place. In spite of rigorous attempts to place

these children, 20% of all children who have been identified as being in need of adoption wait longer than 12 months for an adoption placement and this may negatively impact on their sense of security and permanency. However, it is recognised that the Borough of Newham is characterised by a high volume of complex cases and the children whose adoption took longer to be achieved were for understandable and well evidenced reasons.

Potential adoption households are appropriately checked to ensure that they do not present any health and safety issues to children. The adoption service has a number of written policies to further protect children. These include policies on potentially dangerous dogs and on adopters who smoke. Adopters who smoke cannot adopt a child under the age of five, and the policy takes further steps to discourage adopters from smoking and to promote a healthy lifestyle. However, this policy doesn't exclude people who smoke from adopting older children. Adopters receive training, advice and guidance on promoting children's healthy lifestyles. A looked after children's nurse is available to offer adopters advice and guidance on children's health and related issues. Children are referred to the local Child and Adolescent and Mental Health Services (CAMHS) team for psychiatric or psychological assessments if there are concerns about their mental health or related behaviour. Additionally, the service employs the services of a sessional therapist to conduct individual work with children or family work. This provides a good level of health care for adopted children.

It was evident that the small number of disruptions to placements had occurred where issues of child safety were identified and difficult decisions had been made in the interests of the long term security of the child.

Social workers in the adoption team and potential adopters receive training on safeguarding children and are familiar with the relevant policies and procedures. All social workers have access to the safeguarding children procedures produced by the Local Safeguarding Children Board. There are systems which ensure that all necessary authorities are notified if significant events relating to the protection of children arise.

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

The provision is good.

Children's educational needs are well identified and supported. The council have appointed a head teacher of the virtual school who ensures that children who have been looked after continue to receive educational support when they are placed for adoption. Children have personal education plans which identify their educational needs. Members of the education support team attached to the head of the virtual school visit schools to give help and advice about the educational needs of adopted children. This link is effective in ensuring that schools adopters are fully aware of the educational needs of children who are being placed for adoption and this helps them during their move of home. Adopters experiencing problems in dealing with children's challenging behaviour, whether this is at home or in school, can consult the

educational psychologist who is a member of the CAMHS team and this can help children maintain their educational progress.

The service actively plans and provides the support that children and adopters will need following an adoption placement being made. Social workers within the team know children being placed and construct adoption support plans which detail how the needs of children and adopters will be met. Social workers meet with adopters on a weekly basis at the early stage of placement and closely monitor how the plan is being applied. They assess any potential difficulties that might be arising and deal with them. Children of an appropriate age are visited by placing social workers at the early stage of placement and are seen alone. Adopters are given a £750 per child setting up grant to cover essential items and expenses. Foster carers who go on to adopt children who are placed with them continue to receive the fostering allowance for the first two years. These good levels of financial support help to ensure that children live in homes that provide adequate facilities and resources. Adopters are given free membership of Adoption UK which enables them to access help and guidance about adoption. Adopters can access advice and counselling from an adoption support agency that the council have a service level agreement with. The service does not currently circulate an information newsletter or arrange forum meetings for adopters. However, there is an information page about adoption on the council's website and adopters can attend forum meetings that are arranged by members of the consortium. The service organises occasional social or leisure events for adopted children which gives them the opportunity to discuss aspects of adoption with their peers. There are currently no forum meetings held for adopters' birth children or for adopted adults.

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

The provision is good.

Children of an appropriate age are well informed about their rights and this means that they know where they can go to get help. They receive useful advice about the adoption service which is contained in packs which outline key information about adoption and their rights as adopted children. There are properly formatted age appropriate children's guides. However, these do not contain the contact details of the Children's Rights Director and this may negatively impact on their overall ability to seek help.

Children are aided in understanding their backgrounds by the provision of life story work and later life letters. Although the majority of the later life letters were of a good quality, some were not so good. Placing social workers receive training in this work which is provided by an experienced practitioner who also acts as a consultant for social workers. Currently the quality of monitoring of this work is through the line management of the individual worker. This is usually outside the adoption team and has not provided a consistent enough focus to ensure the high quality of all letters.

Prospective adopters are informed, in their preparation training, about the importance of birth family contact and in maintaining children's awareness of their

own history.

Birth parents are consulted about their views of the proposed matching with prospective adopters. Adopters are encouraged to meet with birth parents unless this will negatively impact on the well-being of the child involved or is otherwise thought inappropriate. Birth parents are offered the opportunity to receive counselling from an approved agency with which the adoption service have a service level agreement.

Contact arrangements between birth family members and adopted children are established at an early stage of planning and agreed by the court. The adoption service has an effective letterbox system in place to facilitate written contact between birth families and their adopted children. Birth parents generally have a high regard for this service. One parent wrote: 'I really couldn't have asked for anyone better to oversee the delicate situation with such good grace and heartfelt sympathy.'

Adopted adults are well supported in accessing their birth records before being signposted to a relevant agency who will conduct tracing and intermediary work.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

This outcome group is not looked at in adoption inspections.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Although there is an all female social work team within the adoption service a more diverse range of people are represented within the assessing social worker group and the panel member composition; these include representatives from black and minority ethnic groups. The adoption service welcomes applications from single adopters and same sex couples. A member of the adoption panel has a personal experience of being an adopted person and this contributes to a greater diversity of adoption knowledge within the panel. There is a corporate policy in place on Equality and Diversity which includes the council's position on dealing with sex, race, religious, disability and age discrimination.

Potential adopters expressing an interest in adoption are informed about adoption through an information pack and via a home visit. Children, adopters and other stakeholders also benefit from the useful information contained within the regularly reviewed Statement of Purpose; this document clearly sets out the aims, objectives and priorities of the service.

Adopters are appropriately assessed, mainly by an external agency with which the council have a service level agreement with. Workers in the adoption team also undertake occasional assessments of potential adopters. The quality of these



assessments is effectively monitored.

The manager and social workers are all appropriately qualified and experienced to fulfil their respective roles and staff are well supported through regular supervision and appraisal and through meeting as a team.

Potential adopters attend a preparation group which introduces them to the key areas and realities of adoption. They undertake further appropriate training to prepare them for their role as adopters. The vetting and recruitment practice for staff, panel members and potential adopters is appropriate and ensures that the dangers of children being cared for by inappropriate people are reduced.

An independently chaired, properly constituted panel meets on a monthly basis to make recommendations to the agency decision maker about adopters' approvals, children's suitability for adoption and the matching of children with approved adopters. The panel is properly constituted from a central list of members. It is well administered and the recommendations and decisions are made in a timely manner both by the panel and the agency decision maker. This ensures that adoption plans for children are well thought out and reduces the time that children wait for an adoption place.

Case records of adopters and adopted children are comprehensive and clearly written and are stored in a manner which ensures their confidentiality. Children's adoption files are securely archived in a manner which ensures their security and longevity so that they will be available to adopted adults who may wish to view their adoption records in the future. A disaster recovery plan is in place to support the storage of important case records.

The service conducts a report of the adoption service which details its effectiveness in meeting its service aims and objectives and identifies necessary areas of development. This report is presented to the corporate parent group of the council twice a year. Internal review of service provision helps to improve the quality of children's care.

## **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):

- ensure that the Children's Guide contains information on how a child can find out their rights, how they can contact the Independent Reviewing Officer, the Children's Rights Director, Ofsted, if they wish to raise a concern with inspectors, and how to secure access to an independent advocate. NMS 18.5
- ensure that children feel loved, safe and secure with their prospective adoptive parents with whom they are originally placed; and that these children are placed

within 12 months of the decision of the agency's decision-maker that they should be placed for adoption. NMS 13

- ensure that later life letters explain the child's history from birth and be sufficiently detailed so that in the future the adolescent child, or young adult will have factual details about their birth family and their life before adoption, and so be able to understand why they could not live with their birth family and why they were adopted. Chapter 5, Para 51 Statutory Adoption Guidance