

London Borough of Greenwich Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

Unique reference number	SC058590
Inspection date	15/07/2011
Inspector	Paul Clark
Type of inspection	Social Care Inspection

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Date of last inspection	21/08/2008

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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 agency provides a service to Greenwich residents who are considering adopting and a comprehensive adoption service in line with its statutory responsibilities. This includes the matching and placing of children in need of adoptive families and the recruiting, preparing, assessing and approving of adoptive families for domestic adoptions. The agency has a service level agreement with an approved agency to conduct inter-country adoptions. The service provides post adoption support to adoptive children and families. The agency has a service level agreement with an approved agency to provide counselling and support to birth families and adopters. The agency provides assistance and counselling to adopted adults who wish to see their birth records. These intermediary services include tracing and reunions. The agency provides assistance with indirect and direct contact arrangements between birth parents and their children where agreed, and there is a letterbox system in place to facilitate this. The agency is a member of the South London Adoption Consortium.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

The London Borough of Greenwich provides a satisfactory adoption service which keeps children who are unable to be cared for by their birth families in a safe and nurturing household. The social workers within the adoption team are experienced, well trained and professionally qualified, and their practice is well managed and supervised. Support services for adopters, birth parents and all those affected by adoption are of a good quality. The adoption service has effective arrangements for the long-term safekeeping of adoption records.

The time taken to assess and approve adopters and the time that children have to wait to be placed in an adoption household is not in line with statutory guidance, in every case. The general quality of child permanence records is variable.

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency decision maker now informs birth parents in writing when the decision has been made that a child should be placed for adoption and when they have been matched with potential adopters. Life story work and later life letters are prepared in a timely fashion and social workers from the adoption team have been trained in the construction of these documents; this training has been cascaded to social workers in the placing teams to ensure that they are accurately written. Safeguarding procedures have been amended to include all aspects of regulation. The staffing of the adoption team has been reviewed and the agency now contracts the services of

additional adoption assessment workers on a sessional basis. Case records are now comprehensive, accurate and up to date and these are routinely monitored by the manager of the service. The disaster recovery plan now addresses the arrangements for the safeguarding and back up of records.

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.

Children who are unable to remain with their birth families are helped to be kept safe through a permanency plan for adoption constructed by placing social workers. While the majority of child permanence reports were of a good quality, a sample analysis showed that, on occasion, reports may have factual errors, lack depth and have inconsistencies. The agency has identified this as an area of necessary development. Potential adopters are recruited, vetted, assessed, trained and well supported to give children the best possible opportunity to live in a family setting where they feel safe and nurtured. This is achieved through the effective matching of children and adopters and a well planned period of introduction. Social workers in the adoption team link with placing social workers to find the best match. In collaboration with their supporting social workers, adopters produce a suitably formatted information document for children which gives a profile of themselves and their household.

Forty one per cent of children wait longer than 12 months to be adopted from the time of the agency decision maker identifying them as being in need of adoption. The service has had two adoption placement disruptions within the past 12 months; both were appropriately investigated and reviewed.

Overall, children's ongoing physical, emotional and psychological health is promoted. This is because the training and preparation of adopters is effective and there is ongoing support from specialist social workers within the adoption team. These workers have been trained to undertake therapeutic and counselling work. In addition there is the provision of effective professional support systems, including links with the local child and adolescent mental health services team and, to a lesser degree, the looked after children's nurse. Emotional and psychological health is further promoted by the early presentation of life story books and later life letters by suitably trained practitioners. These help to promote children's sense of identity.

Social workers make health and safety checks of potential adopters households according to national guidance. The Statement of Purpose for the service states that adoptive parents are strongly advised to quit smoking or restrain from smoking in front of children. Social workers are familiar with the policies and procedures of the local safeguarding children's board and receive training in this regard; adopters

receive appropriate training in safeguarding children also. The service has an arrangement for the recording of complaints. No complaints about the service have been received since the time of the previous inspection.

Placing social workers visit adopters' households in the early stages of the placements, on a weekly basis, and always see the child alone. Children are given appropriate information materials about adoption including information about how to make complaints or raise concerns about their care.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency provides good support to adoptive families to enable children to enjoy and achieve in a stable environment. Adopters are well prepared for the task of adoptive parenting; this starts with the preparation training and assessment and is supplemented by further post approval training. This addresses a variety of issues such as attachment, trauma, talking about adoption and managing behaviour. There are a range of support services which include a consultation service with clinical psychologists and the children and adolescent mental health service. Consultation is carried out with the adopter and strategies provided to deal with any difficulties. This helps the adopters to promote the child's social and emotional development.

Adopters are well prepared and well supported to help the child develop positive relationships and behaviour while assisting the child to understand and manage their own behaviour. Adopters were really complimentary about the support they receive. Adopters can receive a setting-up grant to enable them to purchase essential household items. Adopted children are also invited to attend an annual social event organised for adoptive families. There are also a range of workshops for adopters to enable them to meet with other adopters and to access a range of services which help support the adoptive placement.

Adopted children's educational progress is supported by the service. The council have a looked after children's educational resource which promotes the educational needs of looked after children and who will support those children making the transition into adoption. All children for whom the plan is adoption have a personal education plan in place which is appropriately reviewed. There is a good system to track and monitor the attainment and progress and learning mentors can be accessed if a child is not meeting their educational targets.

The agency ensures, during the assessment of the prospective adopter's suitability to adopt, that the home can comfortably accommodate all who live there. Those homes visited were attractive and comfortable and vary in location and style to help meet a range of needs. The agency has clear written policies concerning the safety of the children in adopters' homes and in vehicles used to transport the child.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children's wishes and feelings are sought throughout the adoption journey. Looked after children in pre adoptive placements are consulted throughout by direct work, to help them understand their situation, and as part of the independent review process. They are also helped to understand why it may not be possible to act upon their wishes in all cases and are enabled to obtain support.

Children receive a guide to adoption and this is in two formats, depending on the age of the child. This gives advice on how to seek independent advocacy. There is also guidance on how to contact the Children's Rights Director. Interpreters are available for children whose first language is not English and appropriate arrangements are made to ascertain the wishes of children who are non-verbal.

The adoption workers have provided training in life story work to both the child's social worker and prospective adopters. There is a template for workers to use to ensure consistently good practice across the service. The adoption workers quality assure the life story books and later life letters. Life story books are of a high quality and are used as tools to help children understand their history. Later life letters are also well written and are sufficiently detailed so that the young adult fully understands their life before adoption, why they could not remain with their birth parents and why they were adopted. There is a clear understanding and commitment by adopters to maintain each child's heritage. Memory boxes are used to collect and store information from a child's birth family and early life. Adopters value this information and ensure it is available and shared with their children.

The service ensures that agreements for the contact arrangements between children and their families are in place and are supported by adopters before the adoption order is made. Contact arrangements may be face to face, or via the letterbox system. The service facilitates supervised contact between birth parents and adopted children where necessary. The adoption workers oversee an effective letterbox system to facilitate and monitor written communication between children and their birth families. There are robust systems that ensure that effective and comprehensive agreements are administered precisely. These arrangements contribute to the effectiveness of maintaining contact agreements for the benefit of children's understanding of their situation now and in the future.

The agency is committed to involving birth parents in the plans for their child and maintaining their child's heritage. The children's permanence reports, which are variable in terms of quality, show that birth parents are involved in care planning and their wishes and views are consistently recorded.

Adopters demonstrate an empathic attitude towards the birth family and are encouraged to meet with the birth parents and share information about the family of origin with their adoptive child. Adopters have commented that the preparation training plays a crucial part in helping them understand and accept this important

aspect of adoption and adoptive parenting.

There are effective measures to deliver services to adopted adults and their birth relatives. Those adults spoken to confirm that they receive a prompt and very sensitive response. Regular meetings address a variety of issues for adopted adults and these meetings generally have good attendance. There is a good service to assist adults who have been adopted to access their birth records. This includes a counselling service provided by highly skilled practitioners. One adopted person who had used this service commented, 'The adoption worker was really sensitive and supportive throughout the process. She was there to help me to deal with my feelings at every stage and I was really grateful for this.'

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service ensures that there are appropriate adopters for children who are of dual or mixed heritage. This is achieved through using their membership of the South London Adoption Consortium and the national adoption register to secure timely and appropriately matched placements. Other examples of promoting equality and diversity include the approval of adopters from a wide variety of backgrounds including same sex couples, older people, single people and people from religious and ethnic minorities. Membership of the social work team and the adoption panel includes members from various minority ethnic groups. However, there is a gender imbalance within the social work staff group. This has been addressed by employing male workers on a sessional basis and including them in the presentation of the preparation groups. The service takes measures to ensure that adoption is available for children with significant special needs and disabilities and there are panel members with expertise in these areas. There is a corporate policy in place on equality and diversity.

Children and adopters are provided with a wide range of information about the service. A Statement of Purpose is in place which spells out the service aims and objectives for all stakeholders. It can be made available in different languages and formats on request. The statement is reviewed annually by the manager of the service. There is a clearly written children's guide to adoption which is available in different age formats. At the first placement review children complete a written review of their adoption placement experience which is constructed in a user-friendly format. There is comprehensive information about the adoption service on the council's website and an information pack which is sent to them within five days of their expression of interest. Applicants are telephoned and given further information about the service.

If they wish to proceed they are invited to attend an information meeting at the agency's office and their expression of interest is progressed. The agency allocates a social worker who gives prospective adopters further information about adoption and who carries out the assessment; this allocation can take up to two months.

The team of social workers undertake the recruitment, assessment and preparation training aspect of the work and they also undertake adoption support work for children, adopters and all those affected by adoption. The manager and all those in management positions within the service are suitably qualified and have many years experience in child care work. The team is supported by a small team of administrators. One of the social work team coordinates the letterbox contact system.

There have been some long-term sicknesses amongst the social workers in the last 12 months and there is currently a part time worker in the administrative staff team who is on maternity leave. These posts have been covered in part by the use of session workers.

All social workers have a professional qualification and are registered with the General Social Care Council. All social workers have either the Post Qualifying award in Child Care or are registered candidates. There is a full and comprehensive training programme for social workers which prepares them for the role they undertake. All staff undertake an annual performance appraisal that identifies their training and development needs.

Social workers receive monthly one-to-one supervision and there are weekly team meetings. Staff vetting and recruitment practice includes the obtaining enhanced Criminal Record Bureau checks; these are followed up every three years. Personal references are taken up which are confirmed verbally. Applicants make declarations of health which are followed up by the council's occupational health department if there are any concerns raised. The careful selection and ongoing support of staff helps to prevent unsuitable people from having the opportunity to harm children and service users.

A properly constituted and independently chaired adoption panel meets fortnightly to make recommendations about adopters' approvals, children's suitability to be adopted, and child/adopter matches, to the agency decision maker who makes the decisions on these recommendations in a timely manner. A number of adopters assessed were seen by the adoption panel outside of the expected eight month period.

Adopters' case files and the personnel files of staff and adoption panel members are well ordered and comprehensive in content. These are kept under secure conditions to ensure their confidentiality. Children's adoption records are securely archived. There is a disaster recovery plan in place which is reviewed annually.

The agency conducts a quarterly report of the adoption service which is monitored by the Senior Assistant Director of Children Services and the council's corporate

parenting group. Ongoing internal review helps to ensure the service develops to benefit children and adopters.

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, in every case, the child's permanence report can be used to identify prospective adopters who can meet the majority, if not all, of the child's needs (NMS 13.4)
- ensure that adoption panels make a considered recommendation on the suitability of a prospective adopter to adopt within eight months of the receipt of the prospective adopter's formal application to be assessed NMS (17.7)
- ensure that children are placed within 12 months of the decision of the agency's decision maker that they should be placed for adoption. (The Adoption and Children Act 2002 Statutory guidance Chapter 4 (2))