

London Borough of Southwark Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority 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 agency undertakes, or makes arrangements for, all statutory adoption work with children and those affected by adoption. This includes the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters, the family finding, matching and placement of children and support to placements, before and after the adoption order. It also provides, or makes arrangements for, the support of everyone affected by adoption including birth families and adopted adults.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Outcomes for children demonstrate individualised care and support. A high percentage of children are placed within 12 months of the decision for adoption and there have been few unplanned endings. A range of children are matched with adopters who can meet their needs. The agency ensures that they have sufficient adopters to meet the needs of children in Southwark, and increase the availability of prospective adopters through working with a local consortium and where necessary using inter-agency placements.

Children are safe and their health and educational needs are met. The effective support provided to children and their prospective adopters is a strength of the service. Workers from the care link team use a variety of therapeutic techniques to enhance children's relationship with their prospective adopters. Education workers ensure that successful transitions take place and that children are appropriately supported to achieve their potential. Robust family finding and careful matching is enhanced by well planned moves for children.

Assessments of sibling relationships are not routinely carried out to inform decisions about their being placed together or separately. Information for children in later life is not of a consistently high quality, although there have been improvements, nor are they always updated or provided in a timely manner. Children's views are not consistently ascertained. The profile of adoption in the authority is high and workers in the CLA (children looked after) and adoption teams strive to involve, support and work with birth parents and gain information for children later in life.

Applicants are welcomed in a non discriminatory manner and are assessed in terms of their abilities to parent children and keep them safe. The preparation and assessment of adopters is effective in helping them to accept the uncertainties in adoption and understand the benefits for children of openness about their adoption and contact. Adopters were very positive about the process and the support they receive and praised the adoption team highly.

Managers and staff are experienced and skilled and are committed to improving outcomes for children. Tracking and monitoring systems have been strengthened. Areas for development have been identified and some plans are well developed following auditing and analysis. Other improvements are at earlier stages of planning or implementation and their effectiveness in terms of outcomes for children, have yet to be evaluated. Consultations with service users are not carried out to inform the improvement agenda.

Improvements since the last inspection

Since the last inspection four recommendations have been fully acted upon and the fifth is a work in progress. Applications from prospective adopters are received prior to preparation training. Health and safety checklists and safeguarding procedures have been improved. Risk assessments are in place for archived records. The agency is in the process of reviewing support services for birth parents.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The adoption agency focuses on children's welfare to ensure that they are safe and protected from harm. Young people say they feel safe and do not experience bullying. All the necessary checks and references are taken up for people who have contact with children, and prospective adopters' referees interviews are detailed and thorough. The adoption team work with other professionals effectively, which promotes children's safety. Policies and practice in regard to allegations protect children.

Children's physical and emotional health is well promoted and effectively monitored. They are able to access services both before and after the adoption order, and adopters know who to go to if they need advice. The panel focuses on children's health and the medical advisor highlights any relevant issues. Adopters receive clear reports and have a meeting with the paediatrician prior to matching to ensure that they understand and can meet the child's needs. All under 5's in the local authority are screened in regard to their mental health and care link workers focus on psychological health and attachments. Examples were seen where ongoing support has continued after the adoption order.

Children benefit from appropriate placements and are matched and placed with adopters who can meet most, if not all, of their needs. Children whose plan may be adoption are identified through formal and informal channels which ensures that the adoption team can start to consider family finding at early stages to avoid or

minimise delay. Robust family finding includes referring children to the local adoption consortium, exchange days and publications. Where necessary, financial agreement is gained to access external placements without any delay. Collaborative working with the CLA team and regular family finding progress meetings ensure there is no drift and that all information is available and up to date. Assessments of sibling relationships are not routinely carried out to inform matching. With this exception, linking meetings are thorough in considering children's needs and record the reasons why matches are proposed, so that there is a clear picture of decision making for children reading them in later life. Adoption placement reports are also comprehensive and child focussed. Young people said that their social workers had made good choices when looking for parents for them.

The agency ensures that children have equal opportunities to adoption placements and successfully place a range of children. For example, several children are placed when their future development is unclear and the adoption team ensure that prospective adopters are well prepared for uncertainty. Full information is provided to adopters when they are considering a child and the adoption team is active in ensuring that it is up to date. Adopters expressed satisfaction with the information they received, which enabled them to make informed decisions. Foster carers are involved in preparing children and have training to help them move on. Where appropriate, work is done with children to help them understand adoption and move on successfully. Adopters said that the moves were well planned and monitored.

There have been few disruptions and the agency is in the process of using information from disruption meetings to develop practice and ensure better outcomes for children. The reports are due to be considered by panel in the near future. As a result of the disruptions, the agency has changed its practice to include reflective professionals meetings at early stages where there are issues which have implications for children's placements.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Prospective adopters are very well prepared and supported to help children develop positive relationships and behave appropriately. They have access to workshops on attachment and behaviour, in addition to preparation groups. As a result adopters understand that children's past experiences can be reflected in their behaviour and described the support from the adoption team as 'excellent' and 'extremely helpful'. Members of the care link team work effectively with adopters to ensure that children are assisted to develop secure attachments and behaviour is managed in appropriate ways. It is evident that professions work together to support adopters and children in a highly effective way.

Promotion of pre-school learning, education and achievement is evident. Children are attending playgroups, nurseries and schools and enjoy leisure activities and opportunities to develop their social skills. Children say they have a range of leisure activities and enjoy going on holidays. Education workers act as advocates for

children. They ensure their needs are met when they are placed outside of the local authority through effective liaison with their new schools, and ensure that full information is passed over. They also work with prospective adopters during transitions. Adopters were positive about the advice and guidance they received in regard to identifying schools and giving appropriate information to teachers about the child. Children live with prospective adopters whose homes provide adequate space and health and safety assessments ensure that their environment is safe.

The range and extent of support to prospective adopters is a strength of the service, and benefits children. Support plans pre-empt potential needs and they are updated and amended as children's needs change. A range of professionals work together to provide holistic support. Adopters expressed high levels of satisfaction with the support from the adoption team and praised the knowledge and professionalism of the workers. They would have no hesitation in approaching the team at a later date should they want assistance. Examples were seen where high levels of support have been ongoing for several years after the adoption order. They also value attending the support groups and said that the annual picnic was an opportunity for children to see that others are adopted too.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

There is an evident commitment across the Local Authority to providing children looked after with opportunities to participate in decision making. A recent audit has been carried out which demonstrated that there is a variation in practice with regard to how well children's views are captured and recorded. The agency has some planning in place to ensure that children's views are more central to decision making. For example, in ensuring that direct work is carried out to help children make sense of their history and understand plans for their futures.

Children are supported to have a positive self view, emotional resilience and an understanding of their background. The preparation and assessment of prospective adopters is effective in that they understand the benefits for the child of knowing about their birth families and adoption from an early age. They value the information, mementos and photographs provided by foster carers. Life story books are not consistently provided in a timely way to allow them to be used with the child early in placement. Some later life letters are outstanding. Whilst there has been improvements the quality of CPR's, this is not consistent. In some, difficult issues are explained in a sensitive manner whilst others contain inappropriate information or are not updated. Positively, the adoption team, CLA team and others, such as contact centre workers, are clear about the need to capture information at early stages in planning for children. They take opportunities as they arise and revisit parents and family members to gain information and photographs for children. There is facility for another worker to be allocated to do this work, where relationships between families and the allocated social worker prevent this.

Contact is well promoted and adopters are prepared and committed to promoting

contact with birth families in a sensitive manner, in the interests of children. Where possible they meet with parents or other family members. Letterbox arrangements are in place and support is provided to adopters and to birth family members in writing the letters. The service is in the process of ensuring that all contact agreements are reviewed and up to date. Direct contact with siblings and birth family members is well supported where this is in children's best interests. Young people expressed satisfaction with contact arrangements.

Birth parents are encouraged to take an active part in planning and social workers strive to gain their views and wishes, with varying degrees of success. Examples were seen where birth parents had prepared albums or written letters to their sons and daughters with support from workers. The take up of opportunities for counselling by birth parents is low and has been identified as an area for development by the service. Links with other teams in the local authority have been made to ensure that birth parents are aware of the services available to them. In addition, the views of birth parents and family members are not routinely sought to inform the development of the service.

Similarly the provision of intermediary services lack feedback from service users and analysis of their responses, both when services are provided in house or through a local agency. Service users are helped to understand the possible effects on them and their families and examples were seen of sensitive work and positive reunions.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Policies, procedures and practices ensure that all people are treated with respect. The adoption agency welcomes and actively considers applicants in a non-discriminatory manner. Adopters commented on the workers' willingness to consider them as individuals in terms of their ability to look after and meet the needs of children. A range of children are placed for adoption and their individual needs guide matching decisions. Children have access to integrated services which are provided to meet individual needs in a flexible way through multi-agency working.

There is an effective recruitment strategy targeted to the needs of children whose plan is adoption.

Timely responses ensure that enquirers receive clear information and understand the process. Adopters are positive about the value to them of the information sessions and preparation groups and felt that assessments were carried out in a sensitive and thorough manner. They commented positively on the opportunities to meet with

birth parents and experienced adopters during the groups. The frequency of the information sessions ensures that people do not wait undue lengths of time. They are kept informed throughout and reasons for any delays are explained to them. The adoption team has the facility to use independent assessors should it be necessary due to resources in the team or numbers of applicants. Assessment reports are of consistent good quality and the analysis is based on clear evidence. There is a strong focus on applicant's abilities to parent children in a safe way and to meet their varied needs.

The adoption panel and the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) make timely and well considered recommendations and decisions, with children at the centre. The reasons for recommendations are clearly outlined in the minutes. The chair, advisors and members have a range of appropriate skills and knowledge. The quality assurance role of panel is well developed and there are systems in place for the panel to feedback general and specific concerns. When they do so they receive a response. Training with the social work teams is valued by panel members. The administration of panel is efficient which ensures that members receive the papers with time to read them thoroughly. Prospective adopters attend panels and efforts are made to put them at ease.

The Statement of Purpose clearly outlines the objectives of the agency and the services provided. The children's guide has recently been revised and is about to be published.

The managers and teams have the appropriate experience and skills and are committed to ensuring that outcomes for children are continually improving. Roles and responsibilities are clear and workers are enthusiastic and focus on identifying any difficulties and finding solutions. They are suitable to work with children. Continuous professional development is promoted and team members expressed satisfaction with training opportunities. Administrative support services enhance the effectiveness of the adoption service and workers are knowledgeable, professional and efficient.

Practices for monitoring and controlling the activities of the adoption service have improved. For example, supervisory decisions are clear on children's and adult's files. Audits and analysis of the quality of service have led to identification of areas for improvement. Some plans are at early stages, so have yet to be evaluated in terms of their impact on outcomes for children. Service users views are routinely sought in order to inform the development of the service. A range of planning meetings (including permanency, family finding and legal) are in place to monitor children's progress.

Records are safely stored and largely up to date, apart from those mentioned earlier in this report. Arrangements are in place for the adoption team to move premises where they will be co-located with the children's teams.

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 placement decisions regarding two or more children from the same family are based on comprehensive assessments (NMS 13 and Adoption Guidance chapter 4 paragraph 12)
- ensure that children's views and wishes are taken into account in all aspects of their care (NMS 1)
- ensure that children have an understanding of their background and specifically that life story books and later life letters are provided in a timely way in all cases (NMS 2)
- ensure that there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling of the agency. (NMS 25)