

London Borough of Brent Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

Unique reference number	SC058592
Inspection date	16/02/2012
Inspector	Stella Henderson
Type of inspection	Social Care Inspection

Setting address	328/330 High Road, Wembley, Middlesex, HA9 6AZ
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Telephone number	0208 937 4558
Email	
Registered person	London Borough of Brent
Registered manager	Gill Kilbane
Responsible individual	Hilary Brooks
Date of last inspection	10/03/2008

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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

This is a local authority adoption service that undertakes all statutory adoption responsibilities and duties. These are the recruitment, preparation and assessment and approval of prospective adopters, the placement of children and support services to people affected by adoption.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

Children enjoy some good outcomes on their journey to adoption and the service meets the needs of birth parents and adopters in several respects. Recruitment of adoptive parents has improved and the majority of children waiting for adoptive placements experience successful matching well within the 12 month timescale. These matches result in nurturing, loving and sustainable 'forever families'.

There are demonstrable improvements for children in terms of their health and educational outcomes and they are safe in placement. Birth parents are involved in the adoption process as far as possible, and there is good adoption support. Access to birth records is managed sensitively, and adopters are unanimous in their praise for preparatory training.

Staff receive suitable support and have the skills and expertise required for the task in hand. Adopters confirm that staff are knowledgeable and helpful. The adoption panel operates as an effective mechanism in quality assuring and scrutinising the cases presented to panel.

The service continues to address historical management and performance difficulties. Senior management are aware of the areas which need improvement and took immediate steps to rectify some of the shortfalls identified at this inspection. Several recommendations are raised however to assist in driving up standards further and so improve outcomes for children who seek permanence through adoption.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection recommendations were raised to improve practice in the following areas: the handling and functions of adoption panel, amendment to child protection policies and procedure, co-ordination of life story work, frequency of reporting to the executive and records of staff and panel members. Actions were also raised in respect of criminal records bureau checks on staff and review of the children's guide.

Evidence from this inspection demonstrates that these requirements and recommendations have been met which has impacted positively on outcomes for children.

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 are supported to address past adverse experiences and make the emotional adjustment to living with their adoptive families. This is achieved because they and their adoptive parents have access to a range of effective interventions, such as play therapy and advice and intervention from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Team (CAMHS) where required.

Children experience demonstrable improvements in their physical health outcomes because their health needs are identified and addressed at an early point in the assessment process. Immunisations, dental health checks and health assessments are up to date and children with complex needs enjoy access to specialist resources.

Prompt referral to the adoption register increases the opportunity to children to be matched with adoptive parents and in the majority of cases the 12 month timescale is achieved. Where this timescale is not met the decision about whether adoption continues to be in the best interests of the child is regularly re-visited.

Children are protected through the service's effective implementation of safeguarding procedures. Systems are in place to address any allegations or concerns, and children's safety in placement is kept under close scrutiny through measures such as unannounced and short-notice visits and statutory reviews.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Children develop positive behaviour and relationships because resources are directed towards enabling them to recover from earlier disadvantage and adversity. This includes interventions from health and educational professionals alongside that of skilled social workers who work directly with the child.

Adoptive parents get the information they need to understand the experiences and history of their adoptive children and, as far as is possible to predict, what the future might hold. Adopters confirm that they receive very useful and relevant information about their adoptive children. One adopter noted that 'all material facts known to

social services were disclosed at the outset including the history of physical abuse and neglect. The birth parent's background was also disclosed. The service made clear that further details of abuse might surface once our child had settled in'.

The service meets the educational needs of children in a manner consistent with the principles and practices of being a 'good parent'. Beginning at the early years foundation stage children receive effective support to enjoy life and achieve to the best of their ability. Their educational needs are identified, addressed and tracked through personal education plans (including those for early years) and special statement of educational needs. Children's self-esteem, confidence and wider learning is also promoted through engagement in a wide range of sporting and leisure activities, such as horse riding, football, dance and swimming.

Children are the beneficiaries of their adoptive parents receiving effective adoption support. All children and their new families receive an adoption support assessment and the plan is regularly reviewed and adjusted according to the needs of the child and family. One adopter commented that 'support has been outstanding. CAMHS have also been very supportive in interpreting my child's behaviour and suggesting practical ways to address their anxieties'.

Post-adoption activity includes an annual event which is well-evaluated by those who attended. A new innovation is the establishment of a post-adoption support group for birth parents. One birth parent explained that attending the group had been very helpful.

Those affected by adoption are also assisted with both letter-box and direct contact arrangements. Adopted children and young people do not always know that they can get support however as there is no children's guide to adoption support.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children who in later life return to trace their journey to adoption will find that staff worked hard to include their birth parents and birth families in the adoption process. Child permanence reports give a good account of the circumstances, experiences and progress of their early lives in a way that reflects their unique needs and individuality. Life story work contributes to this process however the life story book is not always given to children and their adoptive parents within the timescales suggested by the national minimum standards.

Children are safeguarded through careful arrangements for contact. This takes a variety of forms and sometimes includes very high levels of direct contact where this is thought to be appropriate. This helps children to develop a positive sense of identity and heritage.

Adopters confirm that the service is clear about the expectations and benefits of contact. They and birth families are supported by the adoption support team, who assist in helping to write and exchange letters for example.

The service offers an effective service to adults seeking to discover more about their family of origin. This process is undertaken with considerable skill and sensitivity.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

Children's adoptive placements get off to a good start because they and their adoptive parents are well prepared for the journey ahead. Direct work is undertaken with children in a sensitive and helpful way, and introductions are managed well.

Training for prospective adopters is positively evaluated. One adopter commented 'the preparation group was excellently presented and executed', and another noted that the preparation training was 'well facilitated and organised. It provided a useful opportunity to meet other prospective adopters and get information from social workers about the likely backgrounds of adopted children'.

Adopters find the service to be accessible and staff easy to talk to. They feel the service listens to them and keeps them informed. One adopter noted 'our first language is not English but staff treated us with respect, patience and understanding. Brilliant experience'. Another commented that 'from my initial contact to the preparation group to the panel, I have felt supported, valued and listened to'.

Recruitment of adopters has increased and all sections of the community are represented, with workers seeking to rule applicants in rather than rule them out. Adopters are often linked with children at an early part of the assessment process. This means that once the decision has been made for children to be adopted, they can move quickly to their adoptive placements. Adoption panel exercises close scrutiny of prospective adopters and proposals for adoption and matching. This affords children an additional element of safeguarding and contributes to successful long term outcomes.

Children and their adoptive parents benefit from the support and intervention of staff who are highly experienced and knowledgeable. Resources are not always managed efficiently and effectively however. For example, staff in the adoption team are case-holders for children as well as being responsible for all the tasks associated with the core functions of the adoption service. They often attend panel to provide 'updates' on cases when this is more usually done through the panel adviser. This presents a

challenge in terms of the competing priorities of children's needs and consistently meeting the timescales for the matching of children and approval of adopters.

Monitoring of the operation of the service is satisfactory and panel contributes towards the overview of performance. The report to the Executive does not include an evaluation of all the timescales referred to in the statutory guidance however. This excludes an important element in ensuring that all children move to adoption without delay.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service reflects the community it serves and attracts a wide range of applicants from highly diverse backgrounds. This ensures that the majority of children are matched with adopters who reflect their ethnic, religious and cultural needs. These needs do not take priority however and a number of children have enjoyed stability and security in trans-racial adoptive placements.

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 life story book is given to the child and prospective adopters in stages: at the latest by the second statutory review of the child's placement with the prospective adopters and the completed life story book at the latest within ten working days of the adoption ceremony (NMS 2.7)
- monitor performance against the timescales outlined in this guidance and make this information available in the six-monthly reports under the National Minimum Standards 25.6 (Adoption and Children Act 2002, Chapter 2, paragraph 3)
- provide a children's guide to adoption support including all the information outlined in this standard (NMS 18.6)
- continue to manage the service efficiently and effectively to ensure delivery of a good quality service which meets the needs of children and other service users. (NMS 25)