

# London Borough of Sutton - Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	Sue Winson / Marian Denny
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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	09/01/2007

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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 satisfactory.

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

This is a satisfactory service with good features. Children are largely protected by the policies and practices of the agency. Potential adopters are recruited and assessed in the context of their abilities to provide good quality care for children. The content and quality of preparation groups and other training is good. Careful matching ensures high levels of placement stability. Close working relationships with other professionals benefit children and their families, and the support provided is a strength of the service.

Children are routinely provided with good quality life story books and foster carers ensure that they have mementos and photographs to take with them to their new families. Social workers are active in engaging birth parents and families and work to gain their views on their children's future. Information for children in later life, including Child Permanence Reports (CPR's) are not of a consistently high quality nor are they always provided in a timely manner.

The managers and staff are highly committed to improvement. There are some well-developed plans to achieve better outcomes for children, and others which have yet to have an impact. Throughout the service there is only limited evidence to demonstrate that the views of children and services users are sought, and acted upon to improve the service. The arrangements for the detailed auditing, monitoring and analysis of the service and outcomes for children are not sufficiently robust.

### Improvements since the last inspection

The service has acted upon the majority of actions and recommendations made at the last inspection. The quality assurance systems to ensure adopter's reports are of a high quality have been effective. The adoption panel has been constituted under the new arrangements and minutes are now clear. Agency Decision Maker letters are sent out in a timely manner. Staff files are kept in accordance with adoption

regulations. Birth parents are informed about counselling services. The adoptions service is planning changes to ensure there is sufficient capacity to carry out all aspects of their work. Recommendations have been repeated in terms of panel members' files and the quality of CPR's.

### **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.

Children's welfare is promoted and the services works well with other agencies to ensure they are safe and protected. There have been no allegations or suspicions of harm. Health and safety and safe caring issues are covered during the preparation and assessment of prospective adopters. Health and safety assessments are carried out; however, they are not updated to consider the needs of specific children before they are placed to ensure that they are protected and helped to understand how to keep themselves safe .

Children's physical, emotional and psychological health is promoted well and the service ensures they have access to appropriate services to meet their needs. Children benefit from ongoing monitoring of their health. The medical advisor to panel is also the Looked After Children (LAC) designated doctor and has known many of the children for considerable lengths of time. He works in conjunction with the LAC nurse to ensure medical assessments are carried out and updated as necessary. To ensure that adopters have full information in order to meet children's health needs the medical advisor offers consultations which are followed up with detailed reports. Children further benefit from a dedicated and responsive LAC psychologists who provide a range of services. This includes liaison with other local authorities when children are placed outside of Sutton, consultation with adopters and direct work with children. Health professionals work with the adoption and social work teams to ensure children's needs are met.

A high percentage of children are not placed within 12 months of the decision of the agency decision maker that they should be placed for adoption. However, once placed, children benefit from high levels of placement stability, which is particularly notable in view of the fact that the service places a number of older children, sibling groups and children with complex needs. Adopters are well prepared for the uncertainties of adoption and are open to meeting with birth parents, and maintaining contact, at agreed levels, for the benefit of children.

Regular meetings monitor progress and drive family finding, and workers are persistent in their efforts to identify suitable matches. The service is able to access adopters from the local consortium and through inter-agency agreements to widen

choices for children. Prospective adopters receive full information, and are supported, to make an informed decision about their ability to meet the needs of a child. Adopters reported that introductions were well planned and carefully managed with the child at the centre of planning. Examples were given showing that children, adopters and foster carers were given support to ensure successful transitions.

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

The provision is good.

Children are supported to make sound relationships, interact positively with others and behave appropriately. This is achieved by their adopters attending preparation training and workshops which are effective in helping them to understand the effects of past experience on children's behaviour. Support is also provided to adopters and children, and the adoption team and other professionals work together effectively.

The education and achievement of children are actively promoted. Attendance and achievement are well monitored and the virtual headteacher and other educationalists are involved to support children during school transitions. Where children are placed outside of the local authority, the service ensures that children continue to receive appropriate education and support. Children are engaged in pre-school and community activities.

Adopters are positive about the range and quality of support they receive to meet children's needs, throughout introductions and after a child is placed. The LAC psychologist, LAC nurse, medical advisor and virtual school have good communication links with the adoption team, and can provide support promptly where necessary.

Referrals for post adoption support are dealt with promptly and examples were given where work had been carried out to keep families together. The families confirmed the effectiveness of the support.

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

The provision is good.

There is a focus on gathering the wishes and feelings of children and young people through LAC reviews and life story work. Their views are sought when social workers compile CPR's and the adoption panel is active in promoting this. Children are provided with information on advocacy services and children's rights organisations in their guide to adoption. The adoption service does not have systems which actively seek children's views about the service they receive and how it can be developed.

Children are largely supported to have a positive self-view, emotional resilience and knowledge and understanding of their background. The preparation of adopters is effective in that they understand the value for the child of knowing about their birth families and adoption from an early age. Children have life-story books, which are

individualised, sensitively written and include appropriate information. Examples were given of birth parents having compiled books and albums and written letters for children to receive later in life. However, life-story books and later life letters are not always provided in a timely manner, to allow older children to benefit from them.

Children's social workers understand the need to gather information for children at early stages in care planning. However, the quality of CPR's is variable, in the context of children learning about their families and history later in life. For example, some contain inappropriate and very brief information about parents and other family members, or do not make it clear why the child is no longer living with their family. The service has put in systems to improve their quality, but this has yet to have a positive impact on the quality of all CPR's.

The adoption service's high commitment to promoting contact between children and their birth families benefits children. Adopters understand the value for children and actively promote and support contact arrangements including direct contact, where this is in children's interests. The service's letterbox system is well organised and managed to meet the needs of children.

The involvement of birth parents and families is well promoted, and social workers are active and persistent in trying to engage them. They work to empower birth parents, are sensitive to their feelings and ensure that they have information about counselling services. They also look to wider family members to provide information, where children have had positive relationships.

Adopted adults are assisted and supported to obtain information in relation to their adoption. Adult adoptees were complimentary about the services they received. However, feedback from service users about the provision is not routinely sought.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is satisfactory.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Young people's individual needs are recognised and promoted. Children of all ages are placed for adoption, including those with significant needs. People who want to adopt are welcomed without discrimination. Birth families are respected and their contributions are valued.

The service has a recruitment strategy, in conjunction with other agencies in their consortium, and there is varied and extensive publicity based on the needs of children in Sutton. Adopters reported positive responses when first contacting the service. Sutton works in conjunction with another agency to ensure people do not

wait too long, for information evenings. There have been some delays in the process for assessing and approving adopters due to capacity issues in the team. Adopters commented positively on the quality of the preparation groups, which have been effective in preparing them for the uncertainties of adoption. They value the opportunity to meet with experienced adopters and birth parents at the groups. Prospective Adopter's Reports are thorough, analytical and based on clear evidence of people's abilities to parent in a safe manner. Thorough discussions with referees demonstrate a focus on applicant's ability to provide good quality care. Direct work is carried out to gain the views of children already in the family.

The adoption panel is chaired effectively and members bring a wide range of experience and skills to the discussions. The panel has access to appropriate legal advice and the medical advisor monitors children's health robustly. All are committed to making appropriate recommendations in the interests of children, and receive training and annual appraisals. Good links with managers of the social work teams enhance the quality assurance role of panel. In addition, pre-panel meetings now take place, with the aim of improving the quality of reports presented to panel. The panel has good administrative support and the minutes make clear why recommendations have been made. The Agency Decision Maker makes timely decisions and observes panel on occasions.

The service has a Statement of Purpose which clearly outlines the objectives and services provided. The children's guide is appropriate and contains full information. It is provided in two formats, for older and younger children.

The managers and staff are suitably qualified and experienced, and they are committed to improving outcomes for children and other service users. There is a commitment to ongoing professional development and staff have access to a range of training opportunities. Staff say that they are well supported and supervised by managers who are available to them. Supervisory decisions are routinely recorded on files. Capacity issues have impacted on the effectiveness and efficiency of the service, and its ability to drive the improvement agenda. However, firm plans are now in place to address this in a timely way.

The selection of staff to the adoption service is suitably robust. However, files for those on the central list do not all contain the required information. No evidence was provided to demonstrate that telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify the written references. Documentary evidence of relevant qualifications were not contained on the files of social workers (not employed by Sutton) on the central list.

The adoption service is experiencing an increase in numbers of children for whom adoption is their plan. Monitoring systems are in place, which include family finding and permanence planning meetings, which take place regularly. However, a high number of children are not placed within 12 months of the decision that they should be placed for adoption. Whilst the adoption team know the reasons for individual delay, there is no analysis of the overall contributory factors. Plans are in place to reduce delays but they are not yet at a stage where their effectiveness can be assessed in terms of the impact on outcomes for children. Feedback from children



and service users is not routinely sought to inform the service's improvement agenda. Comprehensive reports are provided to the council executive which outline the activities of the adoption agency.

Adoption records are stored securely and the premises are fit for purpose. A business continuity plan is in place.

## **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 children are helped to understand how to keep themselves safe (NMS 4.2)
- ensure that 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 all children have clear and appropriate information to help understand their background, in a timely manner (NMS 2)
- ensure that telephone checks are made to each referee to verify written references for all people on the central list (NMS 21.1)
- ensure that checks are carried out for all persons on the central list to confirm qualifications (NMS 21.3(c) and breach of Regulation 11(3)(d))
- ensure there are effective procedures for the monitoring and controlling of the activities of the agency (NMS 25.1)
- ensure that feedback is sought from service users and children on the success of the service provision. (NMS 15.6)