Thurrock Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

Unique reference number	SC057173
Inspection date	10/02/2012
Inspector	Sharon Lloyd / Helen Walker
Type of inspection	Social Care Inspection

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Date of last inspection	18/01/2008

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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 local authority adoption agency undertakes all statutory work associated with adoption agencies. The adoption team is based alongside other social work teams in council offices. The team recruits, trains, assesses and supports adoptive parents. It provides a minimal agency to people wishing to adopt from another country. It offers counselling for parents wishing to place their child for adoption, for birth families who are not voluntarily relinquishing their children and for adopted adults. It places children with adoptive families who can meet their needs.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Most children who have an adoption plan are placed with suitable adopters within 12 months of the panel recommendation that they should be placed for adoption. Children over the age of five, those with health problems, and sibling groups often wait longer, and the agency keeps their plans under review, changing them to long-term fostering where necessary to secure children in permanent placements. The local authority is committed to providing children with permanent, stable placements. Thirteen per cent of children in care to the local authority are made subject of a special guardianship order and others are in supported connected placements. This reduces the number of children with an adoption plan so that it varies between 3% and 7% of children in care.

The agency does not have a recruitment strategy that targets diverse groups, so the large majority of adopters are white, British, heterosexual couples, reflecting the ethnic and cultural make-up of the local population and the needs of the children with an adoption plan. This is an area for development that the agency has recognised and plans are in place to recruit more diverse adopters.

There is some delay in the recruitment and assessment of adopters so that not all prospective adopters are approved within eight months of their initial enquiry. However, the assessment and approval process is very thorough and this means that adopters are very well prepared for the task ahead and have a good insight and understanding of children's needs. Children are carefully matched to adoptive families so the risk of placement breakdown is minimised. Most children settle quickly into stable placements where they are happy.

Each child placed with prospective adopters has an adoption support plan and many receive financial as well as other support. Because the local authority has very good working relationships with neighbouring authorities, children receive the services they needs promptly.

Previous staff shortages have resulted in delays in assessments and in providing a service to adopted adults. Few birth parents participate in the adoption process or benefit from the counselling available because the agency is not sufficiently proactive in its efforts to engage with them. However, some birth parents do meet with adopters and both recognise the benefits of these meetings for themselves and the children. Letterbox contact is always arranged where this is in the best interests of the child. Life story books and later life letters are not always ready at the recommended times so that children new in placement are not able to benefit from them.

Staff are very well trained and supported to provide a high quality service to adopters and prospective adopters as well as children. Adopters comment on the excellent service they receive.

Improvements since the last inspection

There were 14 recommendations made following the last inspection, most of which have been met. This demonstrates that the agency has addressed the shortfalls identified and improved its practice.

Four of the previous recommendations related to the process of recruiting and assessing prospective adopters. All have been met, making the assessment process more robust. Prospective adopters submit their applications prior to attending the pre-adoption training course. Assessments of adopters are evaluative and analytical. The health and safety form has been updated so that it is an effective working tool that highlights potential risks and actions to be taken to address them. References and checks on prospective adopters go back over 10 years, which means that checks are sufficiently robust.

Three recommendations related to improving the panel policies and procedures. All have been addressed so that the panel policies and procedures meet the national minimum standards, statutory guidance and regulations. An independent and experienced social worker acts as panel advisor so there is no conflict of interest with managerial responsibilities. Comprehensive and accurate panel minutes are made available to the agency decision maker for consideration prior to making a decision.

Further recommendations have led to improvements in the service. The verification of written references on persons who have applied to work for the adoption agency serves to protect children from coming into contact with potentially unsafe persons. Adoption placement disruption meetings are held by an independent chair to provide effective and unbiased scrutiny of the work of the agency and the reasons for the disruption. This enables the agency to learn from identified shortfalls in practice.

A written protocol for the work of the medical advisor has been developed and recently presented to the local health authority for agreement. A social worker oversees the letterbox system and has sight of all letters passing between birth families and adoptees. This protects children from receiving inappropriate information. Birth parents receive assistance to write suitable letters. Suitable storage

facilities ensure that archived files are retained for 100 years and the risk of fire damage is minimised.

The take-up of counselling by birth parents remains low. Consideration has been given to this, and the manager concurs with the inspectors' findings that the agency has been insufficiently proactive in developing relationships with birth parents. Staff shortages have impeded the development of this aspect of the service.

A recommendation to ensure life story work is carried out in a timely way and that later life letters provide useful information to adoptees has been partially met. Life story books are prepared by social workers and given to children at the point of or after the adoption order is made. This is not in good time and children cannot benefit from having information about their past early on in their placement. Later life letters provide valuable information for adoptees but are not always available within 10 working days of the adoption ceremony and adopters are having to wait for these letters.

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.

Robust suitability and safety checks on adopters and their homes ensure that children placed for adoption live in safe and secure homes. Adopters are well trained and supported by the agency to keep children safe. This includes when using the internet and social media.

The adoption agency has effective working relationships with other agencies including safeguarding, education and health services. This means that children are referred promptly for whatever services they need. Allegations are appropriately investigated and placement disruptions are fully investigated and chaired independently by a local authority designated officer. Adopters who need support with managing children's challenging behaviour have access to and good support from local independent specialist agencies. This helps them to increase their understanding of children's emotional needs, develop their parenting skills and reduce children's challenging behaviour.

The agency supports adopters to refer children to a range of health professionals so that their emotional, physical and developmental needs are addressed. For example, children who experience developmental delay receive the support they need to promote their good health and future potential. Specialist local agencies support children's mental health needs.

Over the last three years, 88% of children have been placed with adopters within the recommended timescales. There are good matching procedures which ensure that children are placed with the most suitable families that can meet their identified needs. One adopter said: 'This is the perfect child for us, gorgeous and even looks like us.' However, an influx of sibling groups during the last two years has challenged the agency's family finding. Despite extensive searches, including the national register, 'Be my parent' magazine and national adoption promotion days, the agency has been unsuccessful in finding suitable families for several sibling groups. After searching for 12 months or more, the agency has reviewed the adoption plans to enable children to stay with foster carers either in long-term placements or under special guardianship orders. This ensures that children have a permanent placement and a stable family life. Some foster carers have come forward as adopters. One child said, 'I was not happy with my adopters so moved back to my foster carers and now they are my mum and dad because they adopted me.' There are few adoption placement breakdowns and this demonstrates that the agency's matching procedures are good. Disruption meetings are held and there is good evidence showing that the agency has improved its practice from lessons learned.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Most children are well prepared to move to their adoptive families and enjoy sound relationships with them. For example, a child reported, 'I am very happy with my adoptive family.' Prospective adopters say they are well prepared through pre-adoption workshops and further training so that they have a good understanding of how to deal with potential challenges. For example, one said: 'The training developed our understanding and ability to deal with the potential challenges of adoption', and another said, 'the training is invaluable'.

Following a recent adoptive placement breakdown, the agency recognises the importance of preparing adopters' own children for the arrival of a new family member. Some very good direct work is taking place with adopters' own children as well as with children awaiting adoption. Where difficulties arise in the relationships between adopters and newly placed children, extra support and guidance are made available. This includes access to a parenting support group and specialist social workers.

Children's education and development are well promoted. Adopters understand the need to encourage new skills and build confidence. School-age children have personal education plans and receive additional support with their education as necessary. Young children and their adopters have prioritised access to children's centres where children can mix with peers and develop social skills while adopters gain support from mixing with other new adopters. Children make excellent progress in their first few months of placement with adopters. For example, their speech and language develops substantially, their behaviour improves and their social and other skills develop through the many opportunities adopters provide within a stable and nurturing environment.

Prior to placement, an assessment of each child's adoption support needs is made. This includes financial support and takes account of their diverse and individual needs. Adopters participate in this assessment. The adoption agency ensures that prospective adopters and adopters know how to access the support services they need. Good working relationships between neighbouring authorities enable adopters to access resources easily.

The agency gathers feedback on its training events and post adoption support and this indicates that prospective adopters appreciate the high quality training they receive and enjoy the social events arranged for them.

The agency works closely with two neighbouring authorities and together the three adoption agencies provide a consortium. Children from one authority are likely to be placed with adopters from another. Arrangements for the supervision of placements include shared responsibility for statutory visits during the early weeks of a new placement. However, records of these visits are not well shared so it is not easy for each agency to demonstrate that they are fulfilling their responsibilities towards children and adopters and providing a high level of support during this time.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

There is some direct work being undertaken with children to ascertain their views and feelings. This work takes into account the individual child's level of understanding and emotional needs. The agency recognises the importance of this work in helping children to express their views, and plans are in place for its further development.

Although life story work is recognised as an important tool in helping children to understand their identity, the quality of this work is variable. Life story books are not always age appropriate and adopters are therefore not using them with young children to help them understand their situation. Life story books are not always ready for children before their adoption and there are frequent delays in providing later life letters. This means that children placed for adoption do not have access to important information about their past that is written in child-friendly language. It hinders adopters from being open and honest with children in the early years of placement as they put life story books away, to be shared at some time in the future.

The agency actively promotes long-term contact with birth families through the letterbox system. Prospective adopters understand the importance of maintaining this contact for the benefit of the children. Wherever possible, face-to-face meetings take place between birth parents and adopters, and this helps both to come to terms with the adoption process and provides reassurance and commitment to maintaining contact for the benefit of the child.

The agency acknowledges that its success in engaging with birth parents is very

limited and this means that some birth parents do not receive the support and counselling that would otherwise be available to them. Although information is provided to birth parents about the Adoption Contact Register, not all birth parents understand how to use it. This means that some adopted children and birth parents may be denied contact in the future.

A specialist worker within the adoption team provides intermediary services for adopted adults and birth relatives. The manager recognises that other members of staff need to develop these skills as there is some delay in providing this service.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory.

The agency recruits adopters to meet its own needs and those of the two neighbouring authorities that together form a consortium. Recruitment literature emphasises the need for diverse carers from a range of backgrounds; however, no particular groups are currently targeted so that most carers are white, British, heterosexual couples. This means that few potential adopters from diverse backgrounds are coming forward for assessment in this area and this denies children who are waiting for adoption the possibility of a successful adoptive placement.

There is some delay in allocating prospective adopters for an assessment and further delay in the assessment process so that not all potential adopters are taken to panel within eight months of their initial formal application. This is frustrating for adopters, especially those for whom the process extends for over a year as they consider this to be lost time when they could have a child placed with them. The service is working hard to reduce these delays.

The agency provides satisfactory initial information about the intercountry adoption process for those prospective adopters who express an interest. In recognition of the complexity of this work, it contracts with a specialist agency to carry out assessments on its behalf. Adopters report they have received a good service.

The adoption panel works effectively and efficiently to provide an excellent level of scrutiny to assessments of adopters and to child permanence reports. The panel is independently chaired and members have a very good level of expertise in a range of relevant areas. Their recommendations are based on sound evaluation of the evidence and assist the agency decision maker by providing clear and well-reasoned recommendations. Children are well matched to adopters and their diverse and

individual needs are carefully considered.

The Statement of Purpose accurately reflects the service provided. The children's guide is very well written in a child-friendly style. Information for children about how to access independent advocates if they wish to raise a concern is available on the back cover but is not written in the same child-friendly style. This means that children who are adopted may not know how to complain if they feel unhappy or unsafe in their adoptive placements. There have been no complaints about the agency since the last inspection.

The manager is suitably qualified and experienced so that he provides good leadership and management of the agency. He is well supported by an effective management team. Staff are competent and regularly receive high quality supervision and training. Adopters describe staff as, 'helpful, approachable, committed, child friendly, excellent and readily available'. There are good working relationships between the adoption team and other social work teams. The manager and experienced staff members deliver training to other teams. This ensures that placing social workers know the procedures involved and the importance of working together to promote the best outcomes for children for whom adoption is the plan.

There has been some delay in replacing social workers who have left the agency and this has put a strain on the adoption social work team so that assessments have not been carried out in the recommended timeframes. Social workers have prioritised family finding for children waiting over new assessments so that adoptive families are identified as quickly as possible. Long-term sickness within the team has also impeded the team from carrying out all its functions in a timely manner. For example, birth records counselling has been delayed and support to birth parents is not sufficiently promoted. New staff have now been recruited and the service is committed to working within improved timeframes.

Robust recruitment and selection procedures ensure that all those who work for the adoption agency, including panel members are suitable people. This protects children as far as possible from coming into contact with potential abusers.

Monitoring of the agency is good and reports are provided to the Corporate Parenting Group. New arrangements are in place to raise the status of the Corporate Parenting Group within the council so that it has full committee status and is now the Corporate Parenting Committee. This demonstrates the council's commitment to improving the lives of children in care. Fewer than 4% of children in care currently have an adoption plan and of these, only four have been placed in the last 12 months. However, the number of children who are the subject of a special guardianship order is high, at 13% of the children in care population. This is the second highest in the country and higher than the local authority's statistical neighbours. The local authority also places a high number of children with connected carers. This demonstrates that the local authority promotes stability and permanence for children. The agency recognises the challenge to find adopters for sibling groups, children over the age of five and children with health problems.

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 format of the life story book is appropriate to the child's age and understanding, that the book is given in stages and that prospective adopters are encouraged to update it with the child as their understanding develops. Ensure also that the completed life story book and later life letter are given at the latest within 10 working days of the adoption ceremony. (NMS 2.6, 2.7, 2.8)
- encourage birth parents to use a support worker who is independent of the child's social worker from the time adoption is identified as a plan for the child. Help birth parents to work through their concerns through the counselling they receive and help them to understand how their child will benefit from their involvement in the adoption (NMS 12.3, 12.6)
- develop the recruitment strategy to ensure it addresses the recruitment of prospective adopters from minority ethnic backgrounds (Adoption Guidance 3.12)
- ensure that the adoption panel's recommendation about the suitability of the prospective adopter is made within eight months of the receipt of their formal application (NMS 17.7)
- review partnership working with other adoption agencies so that arrangements most effectively meet the needs of children and adopters. Where support is provided by another agency on behalf of this agency, ensure that written records clearly demonstrate that children and adopters are being appropriately supported (NMS 15.1)
- ensure that you provide birth parents and adopted adults with full information about the Adoption Contact Register in a form that suits their needs (NMS 16.1)
- ensure that all of the information in the children's guide is written in a style that is appropriate to the child's age and level of understanding (NMS 18.5)
- ensure that the manager exercises effective leadership so that the service is organised, managed and staffed in a manner that delivers the best possible child care and service provision for service users, including birth parents and relatives, adopted adults, children and adopters. (NMS 17.5)