

London Borough of Lambeth Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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Inspector	Michael McCleave / Carole Moore
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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 London Borough of Lambeth undertakes all statutory responsibilities of an adoption agency associated with current legislation. The duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters; the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters; the support of adoption placements; post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, including birth records counselling and intermediary work; support to birth parents of children placed for adoption or who have been adopted.

Lambeth also undertakes assessments of applicants who wish to adopt from overseas and step parent adoptions. The office premises are located in Brixton. Lambeth is part of the South London Adoption Consortium. Therefore, it provides advice to prospective applicants about the other local authorities in the consortium, where applicants do not match the needs of Lambeth's children.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

Children coming into Lambeth Council Adoption Service receive an outstanding quality of care. Children who are assessed for adoption make significant progress in their lives and achieve significant improvement across all outcome areas. A strong commitment to inter-agency working arrangements, particularly with health and education, positively enhances this.

Children's needs are at the forefront of the running of the service. They have stability, love and safety throughout the adoption process. This supports them to achieve their potential and enhances their capacity to develop trust and respect of the adults who adopt them. The assessment of prospective adopters is very thorough and the very low disruption rates reflect this. The quality and content of children's permanence reports and prospective adopters' reports is excellent. The adoption panel provides a robust scrutiny of both approval and matching cases. The panel is very well represented by members who reflect the cultural makeup of the local community.

The needs of children who require life-long placements are supported by effective recruitment strategies. Careful matching underlines the service's determination to find the right family for children. A strong feature of the adoption service is the commitment to finding the most appropriate placement and it welcomes applications from prospective adopters from all social, cultural and gender backgrounds. This service demonstrates a positive approach to equality and diversity. The service has substantial strengths and a sustained track record: where areas of development emerge these are recognised and effectively managed. A key challenge facing the

service is in finding placements for boys from black minority ethnic backgrounds. Nevertheless, the service has a robust procedure to meet this challenge.

Procedures are in place which make sure that children are protected and kept safe from abuse. Experienced and well-qualified staff are supported by clear policies and procedures, supervision and relevant training. There is strong and clear leadership of the service provided by experienced and committed managers. Staff are passionate about providing an excellent service for children, birth parents and prospective adopters. They feel valued and positively supported by their managers.

Lambeth faces many difficulties associated with an inner city borough. The cultural and demographic mix of the community present the adoption service with major challenges in family finding. Nevertheless the service successfully places 80 percent of children in loving stable caring families within expected timescales. Effective monitoring ensures that children do not experience undue delay and that they enjoy successful and fulfilling lives.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection one requirement relating to counselling support for birth parents and four recommendations concerning improvements to safeguarding of children, were made. The manager has taken appropriate steps to address these matters.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Not Judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The commitment of this service to ensuring the safety of children is excellent. Robust pan-London policies and procedures underpin safeguarding practice. In addition, this service has well-established local procedures to enhance safeguarding of children. For example, senior managers carry out regular case file monitoring to quality assure the work of the adoption team. There are excellent inter-agency working initiatives in place involving health, education and the police. A major local initiative currently being finalised is the establishment of the Multi-Agency, Safeguarding Hub (MASH). This brings together the key safeguarding services who coordinate safeguarding activity for the service within Lambeth.

The health care needs of children are positively enhanced through the virtual health care team. This well-established team comprising of two doctors, clinical psychologist and team manager, provides a comprehensive package of care, advice, guidance and support to prospective adopters. This team offers counselling sessions to prospective

adopters to reduce the risk of disruption, which in turn impacts on safeguarding of the children. All health assessments are quality assured by senior clinicians and the medical adviser to the adoption panel. A key feature is the excellent communication between clinicians, social workers and prospective adopters. This ensures that any issues relating to safeguarding are openly discussed in a climate of professional trust and working together. The adoption service additionally benefits from the resources of the specialist children's looked after nursing service and multi-disciplinary mental health service (CLAMHS). There is a strong emphasis on ensuring that the wishes and feelings of children, birth parents and prospective adopters are an integral part of all health based assessments. There is a strong commitment within the service to ensuring a comprehensive holistic approach to safeguarding of children. This demonstrates a clear commitment to equality and diversity.

The service has an excellent record of matching and placing children available for adoption within timescales. In the last 12 months, 80 percent of children with a plan for adoption have been placed promptly. The arrangements for seeking suitable adopter families are robust. Where hard to place children are identified, the family finding team are quick to search for external placements using the south London consortium and the national adoption register. The service is additionally flexible in agreeing to foster carers becoming adopters for a specific child for whom they are caring. The service actively promotes hard to place children through extensive advertising in adoption publications and produce individual DVD's giving a visual presentation of the child. The service acknowledges the particular difficulty in matching black minority ethnic boys with suitable prospective adopters. However, a strong feature is the determination of staff and managers to actively promote the needs of this group of hard to place children. Although cultural background is an important factor when matching a child with prospective adopters, the prime focus is on identifying the most suitable family who can meet most, if not all their care needs.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The service is fully committed to providing high quality support to prospective adopters and children. This ensures that children and their prospective adopters form strong bonds and develop positive relationships. The process for preparation and training of prospective adopters is excellent. Adopters commented positively, 'I felt very well prepared and was supported by knowing that staff were on hand if I had needed them', and, 'I found the preparation course very useful and felt it covered each aspect very well.' A positive feature of the resources available to support prospective adopters and children is the virtual health team. This team provides health and therapeutic support that positively enhances the stability of placements through intensive input from clinicians, therapists and other health related professionals, particularly for those who need a more intensive input relating to emotional or behavioural issues.

The service strongly promotes the rights of children to enjoy life and to participate in

leisure activities of choice that enhances their social skills and self confidence. Younger children are able to enjoy the 'Wriggle and Roar' group for babies and toddlers. This is an excellent example of inter-agency working between the children's service and health authority. The group encourages play and stimulation and the services of a speech therapist is additionally available. Prospective adopters of young children are able to learn important skills in promoting early development and stimulation, as well as meeting in a congenial environment. This resource lays the foundation for children to acquire skills in learning and literacy. The annual 'Reach for the Stars' event held at a top London hotel is an award ceremony for all children who have achieved positive outcomes in any area during the year. The local authority provides free leisure passes for children to participate in hobbies, sports activities, music lessons, and theatre visits. The activity fund scheme provides a £500 bursary to encourage children to get started in a hobby or activity of their choice. There is a clear commitment to help children to learn new skills, increase their self confidence and to socialise with each other.

There are excellent partnership arrangements in place to support children to achieve their educational potential. The virtual school actively supports children who may be experiencing difficulties in coping with the demands of mainstream school. Staff linked to the virtual school are on hand to offer advice and guidance to prospective adopters and to schools. Additional tuition is available from the virtual school to assist children who require extra support in subject areas. This excellent range of support for children gives them the opportunity to achieve and improve behaviour thereby reducing the risk of exclusion. There is excellent preparation of prospective adopters to undertake the challenging role of becoming parents to adopted children. The service ensures that they have access to a range of support resources and where any difficulties are evident the service takes a positive approach to reassessing any further support needs.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The service positively values the views of all parties involved in the adoption journey. Where appropriate, children are fully consulted about their plans for adoption. The service actively ensures that children who may have a learning disability are able to make their views known through the imaginative use of pictures and symbols developed by staff. These are colourful and child friendly materials that are age appropriate and culturally sensitive. This demonstrates a commitment to equality and diversity. Social workers are trained in communicating with children in order to seek their feelings and thoughts about their plans. This is very good practice. The adoption and permanency panel positively encourages prospective adopters and children to attend panel so they can share their views about the process. The commitment to involving children in decision making is evident during medical assessments. Children and young people are encouraged by the medical team to have an ownership of their medical information and in the design and delivery of medical services where appropriate.

The service recognises the importance of life story work, where a child's background, including their cultural heritage is set out. Staff are provided with training to use a life story book resource kit that includes a colourful template book. This ensures a better level of consistency in the quality of this work. The independent reviewing officers have an important role in monitoring the progress by social workers in completing life story work within timescales. Birth parents are actively encouraged to share in the preparation of their child's life story work. However, the service experiences in engaging birth fathers to take an active role in this work.

Contact between children and their birth parents is managed sensitively, including the letterbox system. Prospective adopters are aware and fully involved in any contact arrangements. The service provides practical support to ensure that these events are conducted in a way that causes as little emotional distress to both child and birth parents. The service provides support facilities for birth parents to assist them through the difficulties of separation from their child. This is managed with care and sensitivity.

The service has a dedicated social worker who specialises in work with adopted adults. This is an area of work that can prove to be very emotional and traumatic and it is handled with utmost sensitivity.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Not Judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. This service embraces equality and diversity throughout all its activities focusing on the diverse needs of children and adults touched by adoption. Staff are representative of the local community and they undertake their duties with sensitivity ensuring prospective adopters, birth parents and children are treated with dignity and respect. Adopters are recruited from a wide background and the focus is on seeking the most suitable match between child and prospective adopter. One adopter stated, 'I have been treated by Lambeth superbly and the match with my child is a match made in heaven I have no hesitation in recommending Lambeth to my friends who may wish to adopt, their support has been first class.' The service reaches out into the local community and beyond, in order to attract high calibre prospective adopters irrespective of sexuality, gender, religious affiliations and cultural heritage.

The service faces many challenges in seeking the best possible families for children who are hard to place. Nevertheless, strenuous efforts are made to ensure that all children are given the chance of a stable and caring family environment. The service considers a child's cultural heritage as part of the matching process, but this is not

the prime consideration.

The information received by enquirers is informative and includes a comprehensive initial visit where queries can be addressed. The preparation, assessment and approval of prospective adopters is a thorough and rigorous process. It ensures adopters fully understand the challenges of adoption, the needs of children, and are able to meet their needs in a safe and appropriate way. This is evidenced by the number of successful placements and the low disruption rate. The service holds regular panel meetings to ensure there is no delay in recommending approval of adoptive families. A significant strength of the service lies in the positive commitment of panel members to make recommendations to the agency decision maker based on sound assessed evidence. Panel members play a significant role in quality assuring reports to panel and members are representative of the local community. Excellent panel administration ensures that all members receive documents on time. Minutes are very comprehensive and give a clear account of how the panel arrived at decisions. The information for children about adoption is colourful, child friendly and age appropriate.

The quality of records such as the child placement report and prospective adopters' report is excellent. This ensures that the panel is provided with comprehensive information on which to make confident recommendations to the agency decision maker. The service is located in a building in the centre of the local community and there is easy public access. The adoption team are based close to the children's teams, the virtual health and education teams and this positively facilitates easy communication.

There is a strong management team who have an excellent understanding of adoption. A significant feature demonstrated by the managers is their passion and enthusiasm for looking ahead, exploring innovative ways of improving service delivery, particularly to improve safeguarding procedures and joint working. Although the service faces significant obstacles in seeking prospective adopters from within a community that is economically challenged, the management and organisation of this service is very effective and there is a clear focus on meeting the diverse care needs of the children.

A further strength is the calibre of all the staff at all levels. They are committed, enthusiastic, knowledgeable, experienced, skilled and appropriately qualified with access to high quality training. The committed staff team are well managed and passionate about their work on behalf of children. They receive reflective supervision and well organised training to enhance their professional development. Effective monitoring at all levels of management ensures reports are submitted within timescales and the corporate executive is well informed about the service through regular reporting.