

London Borough of Croydon 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 adoption agency of the London Borough of Croydon undertakes all statutory work associated with adoption. This includes the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adoptive families and the matching of children with suitable families. It also provides support to all people affected by adoption including providing support to placements; post adoption support including support for adopted adults and birth records counselling; and support for birth relatives. The assessment of people looking to adopt a child from overseas is commissioned from an independent agency.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This is a good agency that has made significant progress over the last year. It is very well managed and provides good outcomes for children.

The strategic and operational management of the agency is very effective. This is a relatively new management team and it has a strong focus on planning for permanence for children. The adoption agency is well integrated into the authority's children social care services. The effectiveness of this management has resulted in significant improvements in the agency's performance. The proportion of eligible looked after children adopted, and the timeliness with which this process works, have dramatically improved from previously poor levels. Although there are still some situations of delay which arose historically and are being addressed, recent placements of children for adoption are carried out in a timely manner.

The service recruits, prepares and assesses adopters who are well suited to the needs of the children who need adoptive families. Matches are made carefully and the service works hard to begin to consider adopters for children as soon as possible to reduce delay. The agency has had considerable success in recruiting prospective adopters and is assessing and approving a much greater number than in previous years. This further improves its ability to match and place children in a timely manner. However, its process of providing preparation training to prospective adopters before they make an application to the agency is not in line with the national minimum standards. It would, for example, deprive a prospective adopter of the opportunity for referral to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) should a suitable decision be made following preparation training.

The support provided to children and adopters throughout the adoption process is good, as is support to the range of people whose lives have been affected by adoption. Support needs are well assessed and understood, and strategies used to provide support are individualised. Support is provided both by the agency and

through effective joint working arrangements with other services. Therapeutic support is provided to children where necessary to help prepare them for adoption and support them after they are in placement. Consequently, children experience well-managed transitions into adoptive placements and receive the support they need to allow them to thrive with their new families.

Children's views are sought about their adoption and clearly influence their plans. Contact is well supported and the agency has made effective strides in ensuring that life story books are completed in a timely manner. However, the quality of these books is not always good enough to ensure that information about children's history is placed in context with the need to reinforce the attachment of children to their new families. Information provided for children about adoption is not produced in a form that is accessible for younger children or those with additional needs, and does not contain all the required information.

The process of seeking verbal verification of written references in respect of staff does not take place consistently for staff members and these checks additional checks are not undertaken for members of the central list. This means that recruitment of people to these positions is not always as fully robust as it should be.

Decision making in the authority is effective and robust, and the service is well managed and controlled. Work done by the service is well supervised and quality assurance processes are successful in improving the quality of key planning documents and records, which are now good.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection the agency was rated as satisfactory with 15 recommendations being made.

It was recommended that some elements of the assessment of adopters relating to health and safety checks and suitability checks of applicants be approved. These areas have been fully addressed. It was also recommended that the quality of assessment reports regarding children and the timeliness of life story books be improved. These areas have also been addressed, though the quality of life story books requires additional attention.

Improvements in the agency's staff recruitment procedure and practice were recommended and have been addressed by the agency, although a further recommendation has been made in this area at this inspection.

It was recommended that panel minutes improved and that applicants clearly understand their right to appeal against agency decisions. Both these matters have been fully addressed. It was also recommended that the agency improve its statement of purpose and children's guide. It has addressed both these recommendations although more work to the children's guide is still needed.

Recommendations were made regarding the need to ensure that comprehensive information was recorded in children's and adopters' case records. These have been

addressed and records are now appropriate. It was also recommended that the agency's safeguarding procedures be improved and that reports to the council's executive regarding the operation of the adoption agency were sufficiently detailed. These matters have also been fully addressed. As a consequence of the attention given to these matters and other changes in the agency the service provided to children has improved.

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 work of the adoption service helps keep children safe and well cared for. The suitability of adopters is well assured by the careful nature of their assessment and preparation. Placements are well matched and supported. The agency has a safeguarding officer who ensures that all required suitability checks on prospective adopters are undertaken. The safety of adopters' homes is considered during the assessment and matching processes and adopters are provided with advice and support on safety matters including the use of social networks and online safety.

Children's health is well supported. Their needs are fully assessed and work to address these is apparent in matching processes and the provision of ongoing support. Information about children's health is good and fully considered in plans made for them. Children have access to the universal and specialist health support they need. Where children have complex health needs or those arising from a disability, these are well supported by the agency and a range of therapeutic support is provided where needed.

The matching of children with adopters is carefully done which ensures that placements are stable and meet children's needs. Adopters consulted all said they felt they were well matched with their child. For example, one described the match as, 'absolutely ideal'. The agency has had no disruptions of placements of its children in the last year. There have been a small number of disruptions of placements involving the agency's adopters and the children of other authorities. The agency has looked carefully at these situations and a further review is planned to identify any learning points necessary. The agency is ambitious for children who need families. It makes plans and works hard to achieve adoption for children with complex needs and who are harder to place.

The adoption team become involved in children's cases early in an advisory role and receive good information about children's plans which helps them begin to identify potential matches promptly. An adoption planning and monitoring group, chaired by a senior manager, meets every two weeks to monitor all adoption cases to ensure

the quality and timeliness of the work undertaken. As a consequence, the performance of the agency in terms of the proportion of looked after children placed for adoption and the timeliness of these placements has improved significantly in the last year. Performance in these areas had been poor but robust and rigorous planning, management oversight and hard work has had a major impact. For example, the proportion of eligible looked after children placed for adoption has more than doubled in the last year. Although proportions are still below the national average, the agency's continued improved planning for children and approval of adopters leaves it well placed for further improvement.

Similarly, the timeliness with which children's plans for adoption are developed and implemented has also dramatically improved. For example, in the year to 31 March 2010, only a small minority of children were placed for adoption within 12 months of the decision being made by the agency decision maker. However in the year to 31 March 2011, the large majority of children were placed in this timescale. Of a small sample with a decision for adoption after this date, who should have been placed by the time of this inspection, all of them were placed within 12 months. Although there are still a small number of children who have experienced delay these situations are robustly addressed and the authority is now performing well with children currently in the planning process. The agency has appropriate safeguarding procedures in place that are specific to adoption. No allegations have been received in relation to the agency's staff or prospective adopters.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency and its partner organisations provide adopted children and their families with good support. The service provides children with therapeutic input where necessary to help prepare children for adoption. This, along with careful preparation and training of adopters, helps children form positive relationships with their new families. Good work with children and their new families continues after they are placed with support, advice and therapy provided as required. Introductions and transitions to adoptive families are managed in a structured way that helps develop attachments. Information about children is good and adopters are supported to maintain any routines or activities that are important to children.

Assessments of adopters and their homes, as well as ongoing supervision, ensures that their homes are suitable places for children to live. The agency offers financial support in situations in which homes may need adaptations to accommodate children with additional needs. Adoption support assessments are comprehensive and appropriately detailed. A range of support services are available to children and their adoptive families on an ongoing basis. These are either provided directly by the workers from the adoption service, or are commissioned by the service where necessary. The authority works effectively with the child and adolescent mental health service and has access to a therapeutic project if this is needed. Ongoing support is provided to adopters to help them manage children's behaviour where necessary.

The agency works effectively with education services to ensure that adopted children receive the education they need. The authority's adopted children receive the same priority as its looked after children: this helps ensure they have access to the correct school and the support they need. The authority considers the educational needs of young children, ensuring that personal education plans are drawn up for nursery aged children. Birth parents are provided support from within the adoption team and also have access to support from an independent agency. Good information is provided to birth parents and practical and emotional support is also offered. For example, parents receive help to write letters to their children who have been adopted by the agency's letterbox service.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The adoption agency seeks children's views about their care and the plans relating to them. It takes these into account when plans are being made. The matching, transition and review processes consider children's views and effectively capture their opinions. For example, plans were changed for one child who expressed a wish to remain with foster carers rather than to be adopted. This resulted in the child's carers being assessed as adopters. Child permanence reports reflect children's views well and direct work with children helps prepare them well for their adoption. Work is done to help children develop positive attachments and to develop the resilience to understand and come to terms with their past. Child permanence reports are generally well written and contain appropriate information that children can refer to in later life. Efforts to gain information for children from their birth families are appropriate and the views of their birth parents are included in these documents where possible.

The agency has worked hard to ensure that life story books and later life letters are produced for children in a timely manner and has had good success in this area. However, life story books are not yet of good enough quality to fully engage adopters in their ongoing completion. The books do not put information about children's past into sufficient context to fully promote their attachment to their adoptive families.

Good support is provided by the agency to enable children to maintain contact with people important to them where this is agreed. Contact agreements are developed and agreed with adopters with contact plans ranging from annual letterbox contact to more frequent direct contact with siblings. The agency's letterbox arrangements have been given attention to address some earlier issues about a lack of capacity to manage all referrals promptly. It is now able to manage the large number of contacts it deals with. Intermediary services are well managed and the agency responds promptly to requests for birth records and provides good counselling and tracing services.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The adoption agency provides a good service to all people it deals with who are affected by adoption. It recruits a range of adopters to meet the diverse needs of children needing families and works effectively to recruit adopters from groups and communities that are not well represented in adoption. Assessments consider applicants' ability to care for children in a non-discriminatory manner and to promote equality and diversity. Matches are made carefully taking into account children's individual circumstances and needs and the agency works hard to secure adoptive families for children with very complex needs. Good individual support is provided to adopted children and their families with examples of excellent support being provided to children with additional needs. This helps ensure that adoption meets children's needs and increases their opportunities and life chances.

The adoption agency has a clear Statement of Purpose which accurately describes the service and its operation. This is underpinned by appropriate policies and procedures which guide practice. It produces two children's guides to adoption, one aimed at children aged under 12 years old. However, neither of these is suitable to be accessed by young children, even with adult support. Additionally, neither contains information about how the child can contact their independent reviewing officer. Consequently, children do not receive all the information they need about what happens to them when they are adopted and who they could contact with any concerns.

The recruitment of prospective adopters is undertaken on the basis of a sound understanding of the needs of children needing families. Recruitment is targeted to ensure that prospective adopters suitable for the needs of the authority's children are available. The agency has significantly increased the number of adopters it approves. It has approved nearly doubled the number of adopters in the last 11 months from the previous year. Additionally, it has become more timely in undertaking assessments, with a large majority being approved within eight months of application. Assessments of prospective adopters are rigorous and careful. As a result, approved adopters are well suited to children's needs and well prepared to care for children. However, the agency delivers preparation training to adopters before it has invited an application to be assessed. This is contrary to the process set out in the national minimum standards and could, should the agency decide not to invite an application based on an opinion during the preparation training, leave prospective adopters unable to appeal or have their case heard by the IRM.

The adoption service's decision-making process is timely and careful. Its panel is robust and provides a thorough oversight of, and feedback on, the quality of the agency's work. Clear recommendations are made, along with the reasons for these, to the agency decision maker who makes prompt decisions, taking the views of panel into consideration. This adoption agency is very well managed both strategically and operationally. The entire strategic and operational management team are relatively new and have transformed the operation of the agency. This has already had a significantly positive impact upon the quality of service provided and outcomes for children. Work done already is clearly having an ongoing impact that will improve things further. Adoption workers are well supported and managed and are provided with good training in the specialist areas that they need. The adoption team members are well qualified and experienced and are enthusiastic in bringing this to bear in their work to meet children's needs through adoption.

Recruitment arrangements for staff and members of the central list are generally safe. However, the process of undertaking telephone verification of written references for staff members is not consistently followed and these checks are not routinely undertaken for panel members. This means that the suitability of people in these positions is not as fully assured as it could be in every situation. The authority uses an electronic case recording system which is currently under review. Nevertheless, children's and adopters' case records are comprehensive and contain the required information. Records of key decisions are clearly retained on files. Records are securely maintained to protect confidentiality and appropriate administrative systems are in place. The agency's premises are suitable and the adoption team's recent relocation to the same building as the authority's field social work teams has helped communication and joint working.

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 life story books are accessible for use by the child and that prospective adopters are encouraged to update them with the child. Specifically, that work is of sufficient quality and of a style that engages adopters and promotes the mutual attachment of them and their child (NMS 2.6)
- ensure that the application form from prospective adopters is accepted by the agency before adoption preparation has been provided (NMS 10.6)
- ensure that the children's guide is appropriate to children's age and understanding and includes information about how a child can contact their independent reviewing officer (NMS 18.5)
- ensure that telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify the written references gained in respect of all people working in or for the purposes of the agency and persons applying to be included on the central list. (NMS 21.1)

