

London Borough of Havering 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

Havering is a local authority covering an outer London area. This local authority adoption service undertakes or makes arrangements for all statutory work associated with adoption. This includes the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters and those who wish to adopt a child from abroad. Other duties of the team include family finding; matching and placement of children; support to placements both pre and post adoption order; post adoption support to adult adoptees, including intermediary work; post adoption support to relatives of adoptees and support to birth parents whose children will be or have been placed for adoption. The agency also manages direct and indirect contact arrangements. Havering is a member of the 'Partners in Adoption' consortium, established to share resources, including the recruitment and training of adoptive families. Most adoption placements are made through this arrangement. The adoption team is based alongside other social work teams in the council offices.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This agency provides a satisfactory adoption service, with some stronger elements of practice in certain areas.

The agency is successful at placing children with an adoption plan in a timely fashion. There is good evidence that children's needs are well assessed and that they are carefully matched with families who are able to meet their needs and support them into independence. The agency is also good at providing support to birth families and in accessing support from other professionals or agencies if required. There is close liaison between social work teams that ensures the speedy transfer of information and reduces delay.

The agency does not currently have a targeted recruitment strategy and is not able to complete assessments of prospective adopters in a timely way. However, there is some evidence of thorough evidence based assessments to ensure that applicants are prepared to parent a child who may have complex needs. Adopters also report positive relationships with their social workers and value the support they receive. A number of adoption support initiatives are provided by the team that includes support to adopters pre and post placement, as well as to those who have lost their children to adoption.

The agency does not have robust systems in place to evaluate and monitor its systems and effectiveness. This has resulted in many of the recommendations resulting from this inspection. This includes errors in records, the filing of reports incorrectly and the omission of information from files. Systems that have been put in

place have not been adhered to. Staff files do not contain all the necessary information and lessons have not been learnt from complaints made about the service.

Children placed for adoption do not routinely receive a life-story book that helps them develop an understanding of their history and why they were placed for adoption. Adopters do demonstrate a real acceptance of the importance of their children growing up with this understanding but they do not have the tools to help them communicate this to their child or children.

The agency benefits from an established and experienced team of social workers but there are additional demands placed on the team that are not associated with adoption. This is acknowledged by the senior management of the organisation and there are plans in place to alleviate some of these pressures.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection in January 2009, 6 recommendations were made. The agency has taken action to address the majority of these, although they struggled to evidence some of them due to their poor monitoring systems. These related to: involving birth parents in the adoption process and providing independent support; providing a children's guide to adoption that was suitable for younger children; ensuring that child protection training was updated for adoption social workers; ensuring that additional responsibilities of the adoption team did not adversely impact on the quality of the adoption support service; and the development of effective monitoring systems to ensure that all required checks for staff had been satisfactorily completed and adopters files well organised.

The agency now has a good system in place to involve birth parents in the adoption process. This former weakness is now a strength of the service. Birth parents have the opportunity to access independent support from social workers in the adoption team or via an adoption support agency if they prefer. They are actively encouraged to contribute to the child's information for later life. Children also receive later-life letters that contain appropriate information and are received in a timely fashion. The agency has recently produced two children's guides to adoption with the aim of targeting children of different ages. However, neither of these are appropriate for the age and understanding of the children to whom they are aimed and do not include all the information required. Children's social workers did not appear to be familiar with these and had not been involved in their development.

In relation to updated child protection training for those working in adoption, the agency appear to have undertaken this; which is confirmed by those who attended. However, the agency struggled to provide documentary evidence of this during the inspection. Unfortunately, adoption support social workers continue to undertake additional duties that do affect their ability to provide the quality of service that they would like to. However, the agency has increased the administrative support to the

team that has alleviated some of the difficulties. Adopters files are generally well organised but the agency have not developed effective auditing or monitoring systems. Information was missing from the files of adopters and staff and this had not been identified by the agency.

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 agency relies mainly on their partnership arrangement with two other local authorities called 'Partners in Adoption' for their recruitment of prospective adopters. Adopters are welcomed without prejudice. However, there is no targeted recruitment strategy in place or ambition to increase the pool of prospective adopters in order to offer placements to children outside of the consortia arrangements. Prospective adopters are provided with a pack of information following an enquiry to the department. However, this does not contain information about the needs of the children awaiting placement for adoption. This would assist initial enquirers at this early stage of their explorations to obtain a clearer picture about the skills required if they were to proceed further. This information is provided when individuals attend preparation groups but early provision of this would ensure that only those with a clear view of the challenges ahead would proceed to this stage.

The application to adopt is provided to prospective applicants following their attendance at preparation and after police checks and references have been sought. This formal application must be accepted at the beginning of the process and before checks are undertaken, so that prospective adopters have a formal recourse to appeal if their application does not progress.

The preparation of adopters is undertaken with a great deal of sensitivity, whilst generally ensuring that appropriate investigations are undertaken. However, on one occasion individuals were not seen alone when being assessed as a couple. This is important in order to be satisfied that both parties are equally committed to the adoption process. Prospective adopters are prepared for the demands of caring for a child and the complexities of adoption. Adopters report a positive relationship with their social workers and have been appreciative of their advice and guidance. One adoptive parent commented, 'our social worker has put herself out to support us, ringing on her days off and outside of office hours.'

There are referral systems in place to ensure that parallel planning is undertaken for children and to reduce delay in achieving adoption for them if this ultimately becomes the plan. The co-location of the children's social workers and the adoption

team means that communication between them is frequent. This means that children are generally placed for adoption in a timely fashion and do not experience unnecessary delay. The linking and matching processes employed by the agency are thorough and child centred. This is confirmed by the agency's low disruption rate. Care is taken to ensure that adopters understand the child's needs and their adoption support needs are suitably assessed.

Children are placed with families that know how to keep them protected from harm and promote their health needs. Children are supported to take age appropriate risks that enable them to grow and develop. For example, adopters are given information about the potential risks of social networking sites. They are encouraged to accept these systems as a reality of parenting today and are helped to develop a system to face these challenges, rather than to place unrealistic restrictions on their children.

Adoption placements are appropriately supported by social workers who are familiar with the child and the adopters, until the adoption order is made. This ensures that any difficulties are identified quickly and rectified where ever possible. As a result placement stability is good and adoption disruption rates are low.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The arrangements for supporting children and families is good. Introductions of children to their adoptive families is handled sensitively and in line with the needs of the child. Children of the adopters are appropriately prepared for adoption and involved in this period of transition. One adoptive parent commented, 'the placement process was very smooth. It was a positive experience and transition.' Families always prepare a 'family book' about themselves to assist the child, as well as other children living in the foster home to learn about their family and to assist in the initial meeting. Foster carers also receive training in moving children on to adoption. This is important as foster carers are key to a smooth transition, as they have the established relationship with the child and it is important that they portray the message that they are happy with the child moving on to the adoptive family.

During the assessment of the prospective adopters suitability to adopt, the agency ensures that their home is warm, clean and well maintained. As part of this process a thorough health and safety check is undertaken. This ensures that any necessary actions are identified to the adopters and hence safeguards children from accidents and harm. However, the agency does not always confirm that these actions have been addressed, relying on the family to complete them.

Children's education and development are promoted. Children of school age have personal education plans to ensure that all appropriate support is provided. The agency has access to the authorities virtual school, which can provide assistance with any educational problems as well as advice about the most appropriate school for a child to attend when they are required to change school. Following placement, adopters understand the need to provide the child with stimulating experiences, to

encourage them to develop new skills and gain in confidence.

The arrangements for supporting families is good. There are a range of support groups offered to provide support to adoptive families, both prior to having a child placed for adoption and post placement. These include both an opportunity for families to meet up informally such as at the pantomime and also groups with an element of information giving or training, such as social networking issues. This provides an avenue for adoptive parents to form relationships with others in a similar position to themselves, as well as an opportunity to discuss any emerging problems with social workers before they become too problematic.

The adoption support workers are knowledgeable about the issues that may arise post adoption and both provide support themselves and refer onto other agencies if this is more appropriate. This may be to community based support services or adoption specific, as the agency have commissioned some specialist services from an adoption support agency. They have also spot purchased services, such as specialist training for adopters on attachment issues or managing difficult behaviour. The adopters membership to 'Adoption UK' is also funded by the agency for the initial twelve months.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency has improved significantly in this area and now have a good system in place to involve birth parents in the adoption process. Birth parents have the opportunity to access independent support from social workers in the adoption team or via an adoption support agency if they prefer. This service is available, as soon as adoption is identified as the plan for the child. The agency also facilitates a support group for birth parents on a twice yearly basis. One birth parent said, 'I feel supported and they are always there for me.'

Birth parents are given the opportunity to contribute to the child's information for later life and are appreciative of this. They are also invited to contribute to the child's permanence report and their views are recorded in relation to this. The agency encourages birth parents and prospective adoptive parents to meet whenever possible. This is good practice and is of assistance to both parties. It helps in the facilitation of ongoing contact, as well as being important for the child in later years. A birth parent reported, 'It was really great as I felt they loved him and they were right for him.'

The agency operates a letterbox system for the exchange of information post adoption. This system is run by the adoption support social workers. Support is available in putting together this information if required. A birth parent reported, 'they support me and they make sure that I get my letterbox contact. If it is late they will try to sort it out with the adopter.' However, some adopters report that they are not always provided with details of the contact agreement and there are no formal

arrangements for review post adoption. This is important as contact needs change over time. A more meaningful and successful exchange will take place if this is regularly reviewed and all those party to the agreement consulted.

Children do receive information about their backgrounds and birth families in their child permanence reports. Later-life letters are generally of good quality and received in a timely manner. However, the quality of life-story books received by children and the timeliness of these is poor. Often these consist of a photo album, usually prepared by the child's foster carer and do not contain the text that is essential for the child to grow up with an understanding of their origins and why they have been adopted. The life-story book is an essential tool for the adoptive parents to assist them in communicating with their child. Without it they often struggle with the most appropriate use of language and there is a greater risk of them not addressing adoption issues with their child at all. Adoptive parents spoken to were eager to engage in an open approach with their child but they were lacking the tools to assist them with this. The agency have recently purchased an electronic system to assist workers with this. However, this is not yet embedded and social workers were not confident in its usage.

Good work is undertaken with adults affected by adoption. Birth records counselling is undertaken by skilled workers who display a sensitivity to the adoptee's needs. Those using the service are assisted to understand the potential impact that any contact or reunion may have on them, as well as their adoptive and birth families.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Equality and diversity issues are threaded through the service's policies, procedures and practice. Social workers are aware of children's individual needs and they are appropriately matched with adoptive families who can meet these. The agency welcomes enquiries from those wishing to adopt that is without prejudice. The agency is able to recruit adopters to meet the needs of their own children waiting for adoption.

The Statement of Purpose clearly outlines the aims and objectives of the service. This is underpinned by appropriate policies and procedures. The agency has two children's guides to adoption, aimed at different age groups. However, these do not contain all the required information, such as contact details for the Children's Rights

Director and are not presented in a child friendly format. This would help children gain a better understanding of the adoption process. Neither adopters or children's social workers appeared familiar with these documents. The agency is yet to develop a children's guide to adoption support. This would assist children and young people to understand the role of the service, if they need to become involved to support the child and family in the future.

The preparation of adopters is generally thorough and effective in preparing them to parent a child who cannot remain within their family of origin. Preparation groups are arranged with the agency's consortium partners and each takes a turn to facilitate a group; adopter's feedback about the groups is positive.

However, adopters report having experienced long delays in the process. One commented, 'there were extremely long gaps between each part of the process.' This particularly relates to periods of delay waiting to attend preparation groups and then again waiting for a social worker to be allocated to undertake the home study assessment. Assessments of adopters are not currently undertaken within the suggested timescales; although the agency does have a system in place to monitor this and record the reason for the delay, this is frequently missed.

The arrangements for the adoption panel are good and the panel chair is suitably experienced in adoption work. Decisions are generally made within timescales and the decision maker makes well considered decisions, after considering the information available to them; clearly documenting the reasons for the decision made. Adopters report that they were suitably prepared for attending panel and that generally this was a positive experience for them. Panel recommendations appear generally to be sound and the panel clearly outline the reasons for the recommendation that they are making. However, the panel did not challenge the assessment of adopters, which had not involved the individuals being seen alone.

The agency benefit from an established team of experienced social workers, who demonstrate a real commitment to their work and the needs of the children who are placed for adoption. However, the monitoring and auditing of the service is weak. Staff files do not contain confirmation that the appropriate checks have been undertaken; some adopters files contained information that did not relate to them; supervision and records of assessment visits were not always evident; and some assessment reports were of poor quality. Similarly, the agency has not made the appropriate changes to its procedures following the outcome of complaints, so potentially the same issues could arise again. These factors would have been addressed if the monitoring of the agency was robust.

The agency has recently appointed an officer with responsibility for the auditing of case files in order to address some of the above. They have started to undertake these audits in relation to children's files. These are proving beneficial as they clearly identify what information is missing, so that the team manager can address this. The plan is to expand the remit to include adopter's files in due course.

The agency has provided a report to the executive side of the council on the work of

the adoption panel on an annual basis. However, the standards require this report to be presented on a six monthly basis; for this to include information on the wider issues for the agency; analysis on patterns and trends; and any factors impeding the development of the service.

There is shortly to be some reorganisation within the children's service that is likely to affect the adoption service. It is acknowledged that on occasions the adoption service is forced to prioritise the completion of other work that it has responsibility for; such as special guardianship assessments, and often clear timescales are dictated by the courts. The plan is to reduce the pressure on the adoption service so that it is better able to meet the needs of those wishing to adopt and those requiring an adoption support service. It is difficult to assess the impact of this, as it has yet to be finalised but there is an acknowledgment from senior managers that some action does need to be taken.

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 have an understanding of their background by ensuring the completion of a life-story book that represents a realistic account of the circumstances of their adoption. That this is received in a timely way, is of high quality and is accessible for use by the child (NMS 2.5, 2.6 and 2.7)
- ensure that when assessing that the prospective adopters' home is free from avoidable hazards and that outdoor spaces of the premises are safe and secure, that the agency has confirmed that then identified actions identified have been completed, prior to the placement of a child for adoption (NMS 9.1)
- develop an effective strategy to recruit and assess prospective adopters who can meet most of the needs of those children for whom adoption is the plan. The agency monitors and evaluates the success of the strategy (NMS 10.1)
- ensure that the information pack that is sent to enquirers includes information on the needs of the children awaiting adoption (NMS 10.3)
- accept the formal application to be assessed to adopt, before undertaking any police checks, references, seeking health reports, providing adoption preparation or gathering information for the preparation of the prospective adopter's report (NMS 10.6)
- ensure that the adoption panel's recommendation about the suitability of the prospective adopter is made within eight months of the receipt of the formal application to be assessed and where these timescales have not been met, the panel records the reasons for the delay in the written minutes of the panel meeting (NMS 17.7 and 17.9)

- ensure that prospective adopters are seen alone when being assessed as a couple, to be satisfied that both parties are equally committed to the adoption process (adoption statutory guidance, Chapter 3)
- develop a Children's Guide to adoption that is appropriate to the child's age and understanding, that includes a summary of what happens at each stage and how long each stage will take. The Children's Guide includes details about how they can contact the Children's Rights Director. Ensure that each child receives a copy of the guide (NMS 18.5)
- develop a Children's Guide to adoption support services that includes a summary of what the service sets out to do for children and a copy is given to children for whom it is providing support (NMS 18.6)
- ensure that the agency has a record of all the suitability checks which have been carried out for staff working for the purposes of the agency (NMS 21.3)
- ensure that there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the agency. This includes learning from complaints made about the service (NMS 25.1)
- ensure that the executive side of the local authority receives written reports on the management and outcomes of the agency every 6 months and that they monitor these in order to satisfy themselves that the agency is effective and achieving good outcomes for children and /or service users (NMS 25.6)
- ensure that records are clear and up to date and that there is a system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of records and that remedial action is action when needed (NMS 27.2)
- develop a system to review contact arrangements post adoption order, that includes consultation with all parties to the contact agreement. (adoption statutory guidance, Chapter 7)