

# London Borough of Barking & Dagenham 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 London Borough of Barking and Dagenham's adoption agency undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include: the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters, both domestic and intercountry; the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters; the support of adoption placements; and post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, including birth records counselling and intermediary services. An independent counselling and support service is provided to birth parents through commissioning arrangements with a voluntary adoption agency.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This is a good adoption agency with some outstanding features. It is ambitious in considering adoption as a placement choice for all children, where this is appropriate, and it is successful in placing children promptly in stable, secure family situations, where their safety, health and well-being are fully promoted. To quote an adopter: 'They want the best for the children.'

Adoptive families are well supported so that children live in secure and stable families and enjoy and achieve. They have access to a range of support, some of which is provided through commissioning arrangements, including play therapy, social events and groups.

Significant strengths include working with siblings who are being placed for adoption, to ensure they understand what is happening and can express their views in a safe therapeutic environment. Contact arrangements are also ambitious, well managed and well supported, and clearly arranged for the benefit of the child so they have a strong understanding of their heritage.

The agency is very well managed and there are strong links between the children's social workers and the adoption team to ensure the service to children is effective. Everyone working for the agency demonstrates a passion and commitment to ensure positive outcomes for children, which is recognised by the people who receive a service from them. The council is committed to developing and supporting its staff, which results in a well qualified, competent, stable and committed workforce who feel valued.

Shortfalls include: documentation and feedback in relation to adoption support; not using the views of children to develop the adoption service; insufficient staff to provide a timely post adoption service to adults; the panel quality assurance

function; and the decision-making process, but these do not have a significant impact on the safety and well-being of children.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

One requirement and four recommendations were made at the previous inspection. These related to monitoring systems, health and safety documentation, the quality of child permanence reports, telephone verification of references and life story work. These have been addressed to provide a more effective and safe service to children and families.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is not judged.

### **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is outstanding.

Children's safety and well-being are promoted to an exceptionally high standard, with a clear focus on safeguarding children placed for adoption. The preparation training plays a very important part in laying the foundations for this, through its emphasis on safe care, understanding and managing children's behaviour, child development and the impact of abuse.

Children make very good progress in their adoptive families. Their health is promoted because adopters understand and know how to manage any known health issues. They are committed to ensuring children are registered with local primary health care services and are proactive in ensuring any specialist health care needs are met. Children's emotional well-being is promoted through their involvement with the play therapist who works therapeutically with children and their adoptive parents to ensure emotional and behavioural issues are addressed. This is a particularly outstanding aspect of the service, as it is delivered internally, promptly and flexibly, and to a very high standard.

The agency is ambitious in its efforts to place children with adoptive families, where this is an appropriate care plan, and age or other complexities are not seen as a barrier. Placing children promptly with adopters who can meet their needs is given a high priority, and this is supported by effective systems for the referral and monitoring of children who have adoption as a plan. Last year, most (82%) children were placed within 12 months of the agency decision to place them for adoption. The agency is proactive in monitoring the reasons for any delays to ensure these are addressed; for example, it is currently working with the local courts and children's guardians, because it has identified that there are systemic issues which need addressing to improve timeliness.

Formal and effective systems for matching and introductions ensure that prospective adopters are made fully aware of the needs of the children who are being considered for them; this enables them to make an informed decision about whether they can meet those needs. An adopter commented: 'They provided us with extremely detailed information regarding our children prior to placement.' Children are well prepared; all have a family book prepared by the prospective adopters, and for those children who have been part of the adopted siblings group, there is additional therapeutic intervention from the play therapist. This ensures they can voice their concerns and be reminded and reassured by the previous work undertaken with them. Introductions are well planned and include a midway review to enable anyone to express any misgivings at this point. The agency has reflected on how to improve practice and is developing training for foster carers to enable them to move children on more effectively. Children benefit from very stable placements; the placement disruption rate of 3% is extremely low, and given the profile of the children placed, this is commendable.

Staff are fully aware of how to handle any allegations to ensure children are safe; they have access to the safeguarding procedures and all have regular training in safeguarding so they keep up to date. Adopters also receive a handbook to advise them of the procedures in the event of an allegation.

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

The provision is good.

Adopters are well prepared and well supported to care for their adopted children, to enable them to enjoy and achieve. Adopters have access to an outstanding resource in terms of in-house play therapy. This informs their preparation training so that they have a thorough understanding of why children behave as they do, and develop ways of managing this appropriately. Play therapy is also available once children are placed, including therapeutic work with adoptive parents. This helps children develop positive relationships with their adoptive parents. The adoption team has also been trained in the 'Adoption Changes' programme so they can supplement this work.

Children benefit from being encouraged to develop and engage in leisure pursuits which help them develop their skills and confidence. Commissioning arrangements with Adoption UK, a registered adoption support agency, offer adoptive families the opportunity to attend an annual family day, so adoptive families can meet together in a social environment. This also affords adoptive children with the opportunity to meet with other children in the same situation and forge friendships.

Adoptive children are enabled to achieve educationally. The authority has a variety of measures to support and promote education, including an education advisor, a looked after children advisory team, designated teacher network and virtual headteacher. Social workers also work with families on an individual basis to support any educational issues, for example, through attending team around the family meetings.

Adopters are supported financially in certain circumstances, through allowances or one-off payments. They also know the agency is there for them if they need support in the future. They have access to support groups through Adoption UK, who also produce a newsletter giving information on events, such as training, which are available. The availability of the play therapist is a significant strength in post adoption support, in addition to the support which is available through the post adoption team. However, there is no written assessment or plan to underpin the support, and families are not asked for feedback to enable the service to develop and improve.

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

The provision is good.

A strength of the agency is the way it works with children to explore their wishes and feelings and help them understand what is happening to them. This is notably so where siblings are either being separated or need extra input to help them make a secure transition. The adopted siblings group, run by a social worker with a play therapy qualification, provides an extremely effective therapeutic forum whereby children can express their worries and wishes about what is happening to them. This six-week group forms part of a package of therapeutic support which is again available during introductions and contact arrangements. Children's views have been listened to and acted upon, for example, when they have expressed concern about not being able to see siblings again. A shortfall, already recognised by the agency, is that it does not utilise the views of children, gained through its other extensive and innovative engagement and participation activities, to monitor and develop the adoption service in a wider sense.

The agency has improved the information available to children in the child permanence reports and life story books, although it recognises that this is an ongoing issue due to turnover of staff in the care management teams. In response to this, ongoing training has been planned. Adopters are very well prepared to ensure children have a thorough understanding of their backgrounds so they develop self-esteem and confidence. The agency has addressed delays in life story books by using the adoption team to support this, so children now have their life story book in a timely way. Later life letters are also produced on time, although the quality of these is variable. The manager is looking at ways of improving this to ensure each child has a letter of a consistently good quality.

A significant strength of the agency is the emphasis is puts on ensuring children have positive and effective contact with members of their birth family. This includes an impressive number of direct contact arrangements, including birth parents and siblings in other situations such as long-term foster care. This is extremely well managed and supported by the post adoption social workers to ensure it meets the needs of all parties and is a positive and worthwhile experience. Birth parents are very appreciative of this, and feel respected and well supported. They described their social worker as 'fantastic', and said of the adopters, 'I can't praise them enough.' An adopter commented in relation to contact: 'I do feel that my child's needs have been

paramount in constructing the arrangements and my needs have also been taken into consideration.' The letterbox is well managed, although the reminder system is reactive and dependent on participants advising that they have not received the agreed contact, which may disadvantage a child of a less assertive parent.

Birth parents are respected and involved in the plans for their children as far as possible. For example, one birth parent said that she had expressed concern about the religious persuasion of a proposed adopter and her views had been listened to. Their views are recorded on the child permanence report. It is commendable that the agency has an arrangement with a voluntary adoption agency to provide independent support and counselling, although the take-up is low. When it has been used, it has been described as 'really helpful' and is beneficial in helping birth families support the child moving on to adoption. The post adoption workers are also involved in supporting birth parents in maintaining their contact arrangements, for example, with letter writing, and they have recently established a group for birth mothers to provide additional support.

Although the agency provides birth records counselling for adopted adults, and intermediary services for birth relatives, there is a significant delay, of a year in some cases, before this service can be accessed. This is a resource issue due to the small number of post adoption social workers, who are engaged in other aspects of post adoption work, which they complete very effectively.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The agency has good systems which ensure it is aware of the needs of children who may require adoptive families, both now and in the future, given the demographic changes to the population in the borough. It is effective in recruiting adopters who can meet the needs of the children and is developing further ways of targeting community groups to ensure this remains effective. For example, it has been actively involved in recruitment events focusing on the Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender, and Black communities. A strength, commented on by adopters, is the welcoming and inclusive approach which staff display when enquirers contact the agency. Open days are described as 'extremely helpful' and an adopter commented: 'It made me feel valued and needed.' Good quality and comprehensive information packs are sent out promptly, followed by an initial visit by a social worker if the enquirer wishes to proceed.

The preparation, assessment and approval process is thorough, to ensure that applicants are fully aware of the needs and challenges of adoptive children, and that



they have the necessary resilience to become an adoptive parent. Adopters describe the preparation training as 'very comprehensive', 'extremely helpful', 'a must for all parents' and 'it brings the child's perspective central to adoption.' Input from the play therapist, adopters, a birth parent, an adult adoptee and the post adoption team ensures that applicants gain a real insight into the task, and a strong understanding of the importance of the birth family and contact in maintaining a child's understanding of their heritage and a positive sense of self. The agency has recently established preparation training for second-time adopters, which addresses their specific issues, and all preparation training offers a choice of timing, to meet the individual needs of the participants. Assessments are thorough, generally analytical, and carried out in a timely way, ensuring that applicants are approved within eight months of their application, unless there is a specific reason, such as a medical issue or delayed references. Assessing social workers are described as informative and supportive. One adopter commented: 'The adoption social worker was fantastic, easy to communicate with, made you feel comfortable, and was honest, open and clear about the challenges you could face.' This results in approved adopters who have a realistic understanding of the task of adoptive parenting and who are able to meet those challenges and provide a child with a secure, safe and stable environment.

The adoption panel is appropriately constituted, child focused and well administered to provide an efficient and effective service to the agency. It provides a level of quality assurance feedback on the quality of reports but currently does not provide feedback on the timeliness of assessments. Adopters comment on how effective the chairperson is in making them feel welcome when they attend. The decision maker makes a timely decision but currently does not read all the information; neither is the basis for the decision recorded in line with the statutory guidance. This means the decision making is not as robust or accountable as it should be.

The agency also approves adopters who wish to adopt from another country. It does this to the same standard, using the Inter-country Adoption Centre for the preparation training, and its own social workers who specialise in this area. The adoption panel members have access to training and briefings so they are competent to make an informed recommendation.

The Statement of Purpose is clear, child focused and well written so that anyone using the service knows what to expect. The children's guide is of a very good quality and gives similarly clear and useful information so children understand what is happening to them and what to expect. The agency is in the process of developing further guides to meet the needs of younger or less able children, and those receiving adoption support.

This is an extremely well-managed service. Managers are committed, appropriately qualified, experienced and accessible, so they provide a very effective service. Staff are similarly well qualified and everyone is recruited according to safe recruitment practices so they are suitable and safe people to provide a service to children and vulnerable people. All the staff are extremely committed to provide a child-focused and professional service and they work very hard with limited resources. Adopters comment that social workers are 'friendly and easy to approach'. The adoption team

is very well integrated with the care management teams so they work effectively together for the benefit of children. There are good links at all levels, and care management social workers feel well supported by the adoption team social workers and appreciate their contribution to their work. The administrative staff are also very well integrated and supportive, and form an important part of the service.

A real strength of the agency is its commitment to staff development and training. This includes paying for external clinical supervision and qualifications in play therapy and psychotherapeutic work. All social workers were extremely positive about this aspect, which, coupled with regular and effective supervision and support, results in a stable workforce who feel valued, and continuity for service users.

There are good procedures for monitoring the work of the agency at all levels. These include regular supervision, monitoring of timescales, reports to the council and case audits. Records are electronic, and access to the adoption records are limited to those with specific permission to ensure confidentiality. There is ongoing work within the authority to make this a more effective system. A limited number of paper records, such as hand-written cards from birth parents, are stored securely so they can be accessed in the future. The premises are suitable and accessible, and have the added advantage of being able to accommodate both the adoption team and the care management teams so they are easily accessible.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The agency demonstrates a strong awareness of the changing needs of the area and is addressing its recruitment strategy for adoptive parents accordingly. It demonstrates a very inclusive and welcoming attitude to all enquirers, who feel accepted for who they are. Children's individual needs are thoroughly considered when matching them with approved adopters, and they are placed appropriately with families who can fully meet those needs.

## **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 the service user is provided with written information about the service they are to receive, what it is designed to achieve, what is involved and how it will be monitored to ensure it is delivering the intended outcome (NMS 15.3)
- ensure the agency seeks feedback from service users on the success of service provision, and records this centrally and on the case record of the service user. This is with reference to those service users receiving any form of post adoption support (NMS 15.6 and 16.6)
- ensure the wishes, feelings and views of children are taken into account in monitoring and developing the service (NMS 1.6)

- ensure there is a sufficient number of suitably qualified, competent and experienced persons working for the purposes of the adoption service. This is with specific reference to the post adoption work (Breach of Regulation 10, The Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003)
- ensure the adoption panel provides a quality assurance feedback to the agency on all the aspects of this standard (NMS 17.2)
- ensure the decision maker takes account of all the information available (NMS 17.11)
- ensure the statutory guidance is followed when recording the agency decision. (Adoption Guidance Chapter 1.62)