

London Borough of Hounslow 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

This is a local authority adoption agency that undertakes, or makes arrangements for, all matters relating to the adoption of children under current legislation. It provides a comprehensive adoption service that includes advice and counselling; recruitment, training, assessment, approval and support of prospective adopters, including those who wish to adopt from overseas; the matching and placing of children; post adoption support, including birth records counselling and intermediary services.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

There are good arrangements for protecting children from harm and for promoting their welfare. For example, adoption workers and children's social workers demonstrated a careful and considered approach to identifying suitable placements for children. The agency actively promotes the health, education and achievement of children and has good links, and works effectively with other agencies to achieve this.

There are good arrangements for preparing and supporting prospective adopters and adopters were very positive about the preparation training they received. The agency is very committed to supporting birth families and adoptive placements. Children also have access to a therapeutic service that is responsive and provides expert input when needed.

The service is good at making sure the views and wishes of children are taken into account when planning for their care and future. However, there is limited evidence to show the agency actively seeks the views of children post adoption, concerning the service they receive from the agency. Life story work is undertaken in respect of each child who has a plan of adoption. However, it is not always given to children and prospective adopters in a timely way to enable its use in the early stages of a child's placement. Life story books help children to develop emotional resilience and positive esteem as well as a knowledge and understanding of their background.

Adoption workers have a rigorous but sensitive approach to assessing and preparing prospective adopters. There are good systems in place for the recruitment and selection of staff and panel members to ensure that only suitable people are appointed and children are safeguarded. Panel members are conscientious and diligent in their analysis of reports and information that is presented to panel. There are good arrangements for making sure the panel gets information presented to it in a timely manner. This helps prevent delays in the implementation of a child's permanence plan.

The agency is managed by staff who have the appropriate skills, qualifications and experience. The management team continually review the service and introduce measures to address any shortfalls. For example, arrangements have been put in place to improve the quality of child permanence reports and life story books. There are also very good arrangements for monitoring children's permanence plans to keep them on track and prevent delays. However, the arrangements for the more detailed auditing and monitoring of record keeping are not always sufficiently robust.

There is a very good approach to equality and diversity. The adoption service works positively to demonstrate an inclusive culture by, for example, welcoming applications from a diverse range of people within the community.

Information packs sent to enquirers contain relevant and detailed information. However, the service does not consistently send out information packs within five days as specified in national minimum standards. The service accepts application forms after the prospective adopter has already attended a preparation group; this is not in line with national minimum standards.

Improvements since the last inspection

Following the last inspection the provider was asked to address one action and six recommendations. The action and five of the recommendations have been addressed. The remaining recommendation has been partly addressed.

The health and safety checklist now includes areas such as dangerous weapons, poisonous plants and hanging cords; this promotes the safety of children through the risk assessment process. The service has a disaster recovery plan which outlines the procedures for backing up and safeguarding records; this ensures that children's records are suitably protected in the case of extreme circumstances. The letterbox scheme now has a dedicated coordinator; this allows social workers to prioritise their time effectively and means the letterbox scheme runs more effectively. Clear processes are now in place to refer birth families to independent support services to ensure they can access independent support. Agency decisions are now made in a timely way; this supports an effective service for children overall.

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.

There are good arrangements for protecting children from harm and promoting their safety and welfare. The adoption team works effectively with other agencies, such as

schools, to achieve this outcome. The agency actively promotes the health of children and ensures they have appropriate access to the services they need. For example, children's assessments cover their health needs and prospective adopters are clear about what their responsibilities are in meeting these needs. Prospective adopters also have good access to the agency's medical advisor for advice and information.

Staff endeavour to make sure that children benefit from stable placements by matching them with prospective adopters who can meet their individual assessed needs. There is a thorough and careful approach to identifying suitable placements and children's needs are central to this. This involves adoption workers and children's social workers working collaboratively and effectively to achieve this. Prospective adopters receive good information and advice from, for example, children's social workers and the agency's medical advisor when considering the possibility of offering a permanent home to a child. One adopter said the agency has 'a really good matching process.' Adopters are satisfied with the way introductions and the moves for children are planned and managed.

Some children benefit from being matched with prospective adopters in a very timely way from the point at which the agency decision is made. In one case this involved the prospective adopters being approved as foster carers to enable them to look after a child from birth. This avoided the child having to change placement and helped to ensure continuity of the child's attachments to the prospective adopters.

However, the agency has experienced problems in finding families who can meet the specific needs of some children and this has caused delay. The agency does have a clear recruitment strategy to try to attract potential adopters who will meet the needs of children. This includes: advertising child profiles in national publications; working closely with the West London Adoption Consortium; registering all children with the National Adoption Register and sending out children's profiles each month to all local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies. Children's social workers are also very clear that meeting each child's individual needs is the priority and there are no restrictions on approaching other adoption agencies in order to do this. The agency is also proactive in monitoring and updating children's permanence plans to ensure they are kept on track. For example, the agency has a permanence monitoring group that meets every six weeks to ensure this happens. The executive of the Council also monitors the agency's performance in meeting timescales for placing children with prospective adopters.

The agency recruits prospective adopters from a varied range of backgrounds and their preparation and training is non-discriminatory. One person commented that the training was 'well organised and led by experienced, sensitive and insightful social workers.' Another person said their preparation was 'excellent, thorough and well thought through.' The agency prepares prospective adopters in a sensitive way that addresses the issues they are likely to encounter, including those relating to diversity and difference. The agency also ensures children are prepared for adoption and this may include the provision of therapy to help children form appropriate attachments.

There are good arrangements in place to provide staff with training in how they should handle allegations or suspicions of harm and abuse. There are good procedures covering child protection and the notification of significant events to the appropriate authorities. There have been no allegations made about adopters nor any child protection investigations relating to children placed with the service during the last 12 months.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

There are good arrangements for preparing and supporting prospective adopters to help children develop positive relationships and behaviour. For example, prospective adopters receive training that covers promoting attachments and the provision of a stimulating environment. The assessment process helps ensure that the adopters who are approved are committed to providing children with a safe and caring home to grow up in.

Good support is provided to adoptive parents to help them understand how past experiences can shape their children's behaviour and how to manage behaviour in a nurturing and loving way. As well as a dedicated adoption support team the agency has a clinical psychology service and a clinical social worker who is a trained psychotherapist. They work directly with adoptive families and children prior to their placement to support their transition. Children also benefit from the good links that the agency has established with the local child and adolescent mental health service. This ensures that prompt support and guidance is available to children and adults. Support needs are appropriately assessed and support plans are implemented. The two assistant team managers for adoption are involved in all permanency planning meetings. This helps ensure any post placement issues are highlighted and appropriate support provided at an early stage. Other ways the service supports adoptive families include regular communication via a newsletter, organising and facilitating social events, seminars and training workshops. There is also a support group for adult adoptees.

Children placed in adoptive families are encouraged and supported to achieve their educational potential. Training for prospective adopters covers the promotion of children's education and achievement. Social workers have good working relationships with local education services and this helps ensure effective planning for the future educational needs of children. There is appropriate access to additional education support when needed. There is also support for children who have to move schools when they are placed with an adoptive family.

Adoption workers carry out thorough assessments of prospective adopters' homes to make sure that children live in a safe, warm and comfortable environment. These assessments include a health and safety assessment of the home that covers a range of factors.

The agency demonstrates a strong commitment to supporting birth parents and

families. This includes commissioning an independent service for birth families which offers counselling sessions. The agency reviews these arrangements at regular intervals to make sure the needs of people who use the service are being met. There are suitable arrangements for making sure birth families receive written information about the services that are available.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

There are, overall, good arrangements for making sure the views and wishes of children are taken into account and, where possible acted upon. For example, the children's guide to adoption includes how to contact an independent advocacy service should they have any concerns. There were good examples of social workers consulting children about the plans for their future. The agency ensures children's views are central to permanency planning meetings and the matching process.

The Council has a Children in Care Council and representatives from this are also on the Council's Corporate Parenting Panel. These forums are used to consult children and young people about the service they receive from the Council and it is evident they have an impact on service delivery and development. However, apart from consulting children and young people about the annual Fun Day and annual picnic, there is limited evidence available to demonstrate that the adoption agency actively seeks children's views about the service it provides to them and how it can be developed.

Adoption workers and children's social workers endeavour to obtain appropriate information to enable children to gain a good knowledge and understanding of their backgrounds. Life story work is undertaken in respect of all children being placed for adoption. The adoption support team have provided life story work training to children's social workers and hold regular life story workshops. These arrangements, as well as the reduction in the turnover of staff within the children's teams, have led to an improvement in the quality of life story work. The national minimum standards state that the life story book should be given to the child and prospective adopters, at the latest, by the time of the second statutory review. There was evidence that this timescale was being met. However, children's social workers said the aim is to have life story books ready to go with the child when they are placed with their prospective adopters. Achieving this would clearly help with the work being done in the early stages of the child's placement but, due to delays, this does not always happen.

The agency is committed to promoting and supporting constructive contact between a child and their birth family when it is beneficial to the child. For example, where appropriate, prospective adopters are actively encouraged to meet with birth parents before a child is placed. Staff also help by providing practical support such as assistance with writing letters and there is a good letterbox system in place. The agency is also committed to working with birth parents and families and encourages, where appropriate, their involvement in planning for their children. The agency

ensures birth parents have access to independent support. Adoption workers and children's social workers actively encourage birth parents to take advantage of this service so that they are helped to work through any concerns they have regarding the plans for their child. Where possible the agency also keeps birth parents informed of the progress of their child's adoption.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency has a clear strategy for recruiting prospective adopters and keeps this under review. Adoption workers and their managers demonstrate a careful and thoughtful approach towards ensuring the most suitable placements are found for children. They also take a rigorous but sensitive approach to the assessment and preparation of prospective adopters. They treat prospective adopters and people who are interested in becoming adopters fairly and with respect. This includes ensuring enquirers receive clear written information about the process and the needs of children who require an adoptive family. People said that Hounslow is very welcoming and they confirmed that their preparation training prepared them for the realities of adoption. One adoptive parent said support from their assessing social worker, 'has been outstanding. We have felt safe to be open and honest and to seek support when needed.'

However, records kept of when people make initial enquires and are sent information packs are not always clear and accessible. This makes it more difficult to monitor whether the service ensures people receive information and advice in a timely way. The service does not consistently send out information packs to enquirers within five days as specified in the national minimum standards. Also, the service does not always comply with the national minimum standard regarding when it accepts an application from prospective adopters. For example, two prospective adopters attended a preparation group before they had completed their application.

As part of the assessment of prospective adopters the adoption workers ensure robust checks are carried out on all applicants who are assessed to ensure they are suitable and safe to care for children. They also complete thorough, analytical assessments of prospective adopters to make sure they have the competencies and capacities needed to meet the challenges of the adoption task. A manager of another adoption service, who has placed children with the agency said Hounslow provides an 'effective preparation of adopters for a placement' and ensures 'good quality prospective adopters' reports showcase their adopters well.'

The agency is currently updating its policies and procedures in order to comply with

current legislation and guidance. The adoption panel is properly constituted with members drawn from a central list. It is well managed and has good administrative support to enable it to carry out its business. It also has good access to legal and medical advice. The panel provides a rigorous analysis of the information presented to it and conscientiously reaches its decisions and recommendations. Decisions are made in the best interests of children and are usually timely. Adoptive parents said they were made to feel welcome by the panel. For example one person said, 'The panel was welcoming and asked questions well suited to our circumstances. Their feedback was detailed and encouraging.'

The agency has a Statement of Purpose that provides a clear and concise outline of what services are provided and how outcomes for children are to be achieved. There is also a children's guide to adoption which is given in conjunction with leaflets about how to complain and access an independent advocate.

Overall the agency has good systems for the recruitment and selection of staff and adoption panel members. These ensure only appropriately qualified and suitable people are appointed and that children are safeguarded. However, staff personnel records are not in a readily accessible format and some documentation was not available. For example, there was no copy of one person's qualifications and a full employment history was not available for another person. The adoption manager confirmed that these documents had been obtained and checked.

The day-to-day management of the service is sound. In particular there is very good monitoring of permanence plans to prevent drift and promote good outcomes for the children. However, the arrangements for monitoring the quality and adequacy of other records, such as staff recruitment records, are not always sufficiently robust.

Staff and panel members are provided with good opportunities for their training and development. There is an annual schedule of training and staff can access more specialised training to develop their skills and competences; this training helps to achieve good quality outcomes for children.

The management team ensures that staff have a fair and balanced workload as well as appropriate support and supervision. The adoption workers demonstrated a clear commitment to continuous professional development and are very enthusiastic about improving standards and outcomes for children and families. For example, they provide support and training to children's social workers to enable them to gain a good understanding of adoption.

Staff work in good conditions with effective administration support to enable them to undertake their duties. There are excellent arrangements to ensure that adoption records are stored securely and confidentiality is protected.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The agency endeavours to recruit prospective adopters from a range of applicants, including same sex partnerships, single adults and minority ethnic couples. Adoption workers make sure equality and diversity issues are appropriately addressed in the assessment and preparation of

prospective adopters. There is a clear emphasis placed on children understanding their identity and place within their family of heritage. The matching of children to prospective adopters is carried out carefully and sensitively and, for example, religious and cultural considerations inform the overall process. This helps to ensure that, as far as possible, children are placed with adults who can best meet their 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 wishes, feelings and views of children post adoption are actively sought and taken into account by the agency in monitoring and developing its service (NMS 1.6)
- ensure the life story book is given to the child and prospective adopters in stages to enable its positive use in the early stages of a child's placement (NMS2.7)
- ensure the information pack is sent to enquirers within five working days of the enquiry (NMS 10.3)
- ensure the agency's application form is accepted after the prospective adopter has been counselled and attended an information meeting, and before adoption preparation has been provided. (NMS 10.6)
- ensure there is a robust and effective system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record keeping and take action when needed. (NMS 27.2)