

London Borough Of Ealing Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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Setting address	London Borough of Ealing, Perceval House, 14-16 Uxbridge Road, London, W5 2HL
Telephone number	0208 825 8815
Email	cfair@ealing.gov.uk
Registered person	London Borough of Ealing
Registered manager	
Responsible individual	Judith Finlay
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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 Ealing's adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters. The service has commissioned the services of the Intercountry Adoption Centre to provide preparation training for applicants who wish to adopt a child from overseas.

The service carries out the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters. Post-adoption support is provided to adoptive families and to adults affected by adoption. This includes birth records counselling and intermediary work. The service operates and maintains a letterbox information exchange. Birth relatives receive an independent counselling and support service through commissioning arrangements with the Post Adoption Centre.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

All individual outcome areas of this inspection are outstanding. The service achieves exceptionally good outcomes for children, adults affected by adoption and adopters. In all areas, the service demonstrates an impressive commitment to equality and diversity and delivers exceptionally well-tailored, individualised services.

One adopter said: 'The social workers in Ealing have always been very supportive, professional and easy to talk to. It makes a real difference to have staff who are completely dedicated and have a great knowledge base.'

Ealing has worked exceptionally hard to minimise delays in the adoption process. In 2011, 100% of looked after children who were adopted during the year, were placed within 12 months of the decision that adoption was in their best interests. As with many authorities, the service does have a small number of children with complex needs who are awaiting placements. There are sound reasons for this in each child's case. Any delays are addressed through excellent recruitment and matching systems which help to ensure that all children have the opportunity to grow up in a permanent family.

The service has a strong commitment to education. There is excellent provision through the looked after children's service for supporting adoption placements in school.

The service has exceptionally strong links with a wide range of post-adoption support services. Adoption support is tailored carefully to meet individual needs.

Adopters say that they are exceptionally well supported during introductions, placement and after adoption, through innovative and flexible use of resources. One adopter said: 'Ealing have been excellent throughout the process. They have been gentle and sensitive throughout the assessment and placing and helping me afterwards...I know there is a brilliant service there if I ever need it in the future, or if my child needs it in the future. I would recommend Ealing to anyone wanting to adopt; they have treated us fairly throughout.'

Birth relatives and adults affected by adoption also commented on the excellence of the adoption support service. There are exceptionally good examples of intermediary work and determined efforts to establish contact to help children develop their sense of identity.

The leadership of this service is stable, extremely knowledgeable and passionate about achieving excellent outcomes for service users. The adoption panel forms part of the service's robust quality assurance systems, to provide effective monitoring and ensure that children's needs are met in a timely manner.

The service shows a strong commitment to continuing improvement. There are clear plans for further service development, in particular with regard to education documentation specific to adoption and building on existing consultation with adoptive families. No recommendations have been made.

Improvements since the last inspection

All requirements and recommendations made at the last inspection have been addressed. The first requirement concerned the need to implement quality assurance systems for all aspects of the adoption service. The second requirement was to ensure that all the necessary checks are conducted on panel members. Both of these requirements are now fully in place.

The first recommendation concerned the timing of the application to adopt. The application is now correctly taken before the start of the preparation group. The second recommendation related to health and safety checks on households. The service now ensures that comprehensive checks are in place, including pet assessments.

The third recommendation related to the quality of child permanence reports, which have much improved. The fourth recommendation concerned the agency's safeguarding policy, which has now been updated to ensure that there is specific reference to all issues likely to impact on the adoption service. The final recommendation concerned the need for telephone verification of references during staff recruitment. Telephone verification now takes place to ensure that references are valid and reliable.

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 are happy, settled and clearly feel safe in their homes. Adopters confirm that they receive appropriate training on how to keep children safe, including the need to safeguard them from risks associated with the internet.

As part of a child protection agency, the service has strong links with the Local Safeguarding Children Board. The Pan-London Child Protection Procedures include information on how to respond to allegations of abuse which took place in the distant past.

Effective training takes place to ensure that staff and adopters have a thorough understanding of what to do in the event of a child or adult making a disclosure. There has been one child protection referral, which was dealt with appropriately. The adoption panel is kept fully informed of any child protection issues in order to ensure that they have an effective oversight of all aspects of the service.

Children's health care needs are exceptionally well recorded to help ensure that adopters understand all the implications of their backgrounds and any health issues. The service has an effective smoking policy, which helps to prevent very young or otherwise vulnerable children in adoptive families from health risks associated with smoke inhalation.

Adopters confirm that they have received excellent medical advice. The service has its own Looked After Children's (LAC) psychologist, who provides a very high quality service to children in all stages of the adoption journey. Children's health, wishes and feelings are well recorded on child permanence reports to enable prospective adopters to have the best quality information about how to meet their needs.

There have been no disruptions since 2009. Any disruption meetings are chaired independently, to help ensure that optimal learning is achieved.

Prospective adopters who may face a long wait for a match, are referred to the National Adoption Register without delay. Social workers make every effort to maintain contact with birth parents and to obtain their consent to adoption, as soon as a decision is made that this should be the plan for the child.

Prospective adopters' reports are of very good quality, with considerable detail and analysis. Child permanence reports have improved over the past 18 months. They are effectively quality assured to maintain consistently good standards. Reports are

child-centred and provide an excellent level of detail to facilitate effective family finding.

The service has robust systems in place to ensure high quality matching decisions. There is concurrent planning in place for the majority of children, and the adoption team keeps in close contact with the looked after children's teams in order to monitor progress of each child. The service's Information Technology systems help support this process very effectively. Consequently, children in this authority do not 'drift' in care. Their progress is ensured through excellent day-to-day communication between staff and close management monitoring. The service has access to a wide range of prospective adopters through an adoption consortium.

All adopters with children placed said that they were happy with the level and quality of information provided, as well as with the planning and pace of introductions. Children have the opportunity to visit the family home prior to the placement, to help them to feel comfortable with their new family. This also helps children who may have experienced a number of moves in their lives, to settle in unfamiliar surroundings.

The service assesses and approves prospective adopters who wish to adopt from another country. Information meetings and preparation groups are provided by the Intercountry Adoption Centre, to ensure that applicants receive the most up-to-date specialist advice. Some members of the adoption support team who undertake these assessments, have developed considerable skills in this area of work. The adoption panel also has appropriate expertise in this specialised field of adoption, to help ensure positive outcomes for children.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The level of support provided for adoptive families is exceptionally strong. The service provides an excellent range of resources through commissioned arrangements, for example, with the Post Adoption Centre.

There is also considerable expertise within the service to undertake direct work with children and families. For example, the LAC psychologist provides an excellent service to support children with a plan for adoption, or those who have been adopted.

Children who are old enough to engage in clubs and activities have an extensive range on offer. For example, one young person goes swimming, attends drama club and enjoys French and singing lessons. Younger children are able to access healthy activities such as soft play and going to the park.

Individual adopters and the service as a whole, provide very good support for children in education. The virtual headteacher sits on the adoption panel to provide a valued source of information and also helps to progress potentially difficult

transitions between schools. There are five teachers who work specifically with looked after children, including those placed for adoption, to help ensure that their educational needs are met.

The service is in the process of consulting with parents to inform and help to formalise their education policy. There are already clear education strategies in place; for example, adopted children have the same rights as looked after children in terms of choice of schools. This is a positive development because it enables adopters to select a school best suited to their child's individual needs.

Headteachers have been advised that they can consult the Post Adoption Centre for specific information on working with adopted children in school. Social workers say that they often go into schools to explain issues around adoption to colleagues in education. The service is looking at ways to develop this work in future.

Homes seen during the inspection are of a very good standard, representing a wide range of styles and facilities for children. Social workers complete health and safety checklists and ensure that pet risk assessments are in place by the end of the assessment period. This helps to reduce avoidable risks to children.

The adoption support team manager assesses need for adoption support services in an equitable manner. Services are provided without prejudice. The service provides adoption support services through a range of excellent commissioning arrangements, underpinned by clear service level agreements.

Service users receive very good quality written information regarding post adoption support. The service is extremely flexible, adaptable and creative in its use of resources and there is clearly a sense of 'going the extra mile' to achieve positive outcomes.

Exceptionally good work takes place across local authority and national boundaries to help ensure that service users receive the support they need. Staff sourced counselling services from service users' employers and in other countries. This shows exceptional commitment and innovative practice in order to respond to individual need.

The service regularly evaluates adoption support services. Well-constructed questionnaires invite comments from adopters and the outcomes help to inform future practice.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Children's views are very well recorded in the child permanence reports. Where it has not been possible to ascertain the child's views, the reasons for this are explained. All children's guides are available in different formats and can be translated into any language, as needed.

Work is in progress to update some of the authority's literature, for example, the children's complaints procedure, to ensure that children and young people have access to current contact details. The local authority has a clear and detailed corporate complaints procedure to help ensure that all adult and child service users' voices are heard.

Looked after children are consulted exceptionally well in this authority. Once adopted, this process becomes more complicated, because families vary in terms of how much ongoing contact they wish to have with the service. Adopters' and children's wishes and feelings have to be considered carefully before any contact is made. However, children who attend groups are consulted about their views and adoptive families took part in a recent survey.

Birth parents are always consulted during the preparation of the child permanence report. If they do not wish to participate, this is recorded in the report. Birth family members are supported to provide information about the child's early life. This helps the child to establish their sense of identity. Birth family members gave examples of how they had updated the service with family news after the child had been adopted. This has led to some exceptionally positive outcomes.

Adopters are well aware of the need to keep treasured items safe during the child's early years, to ensure that they have access to quality information about their identity and heritage later in life. Life story books are usually prepared and delivered during or before the child's second review in the adoptive placement. The quality of the work is generally good. The later-life letter is written by social workers who know the child really well. This helps to ensure that it contains as much information as possible that will help the young person understand their culture and identity as they grow up. Children's social workers and their managers are dedicated to ensuring that these important pieces of work are completed on time.

Adopters receive excellent training and support in relation to contact arrangements. As a result, some adopters have been able and willing to accommodate changes to contact arrangements with birth family circumstances change, leading to positive outcomes for all parties.

The adoption service supports contact exceptionally well. When direct contact takes place, the service facilitates this in a suitable environment. Social workers encourage children to make a craft item with their birth family in order to help them remember the occasion. The adoption support team has established positive contact for birth relatives and children in very difficult and sensitive circumstances. One birth relative said that she had been well supported to establish positive contact with the adoptive family for the first time. The service carefully prepares all parties for the possible consequences of contact. One person said: 'The service never makes false promises', and, 'they tell it how it is'.

The adoption support team strives to maintain open and transparent relationships with birth family members. The service succeeds exceptionally well in engaging hard-

to-reach individuals, through commissioning arrangements with the Post Adoption Centre. Although some surveys from birth relatives expressed frustration with the adoption process in general, others were very positive. One birth parent said: 'My social worker was very informative. They never judged the situation. They provided me with information if I needed further help. I was very happy with the service.'

There is a sound, effective and very well-managed letterbox exchange system in place, involving 190 individual exchange arrangements. The service provides adoption support to men in a local prison, including helping them to write letters in a suitable format for their children. Adopters and birth relatives are very well aware of the possible risks associated with unauthorised internet contacts.

Adopted adults and birth family members all say that they have been given full and helpful information about adoption support services. Adults affected by adoption are exceptionally well supported and are fully involved in decision making. An intermediary service is provided, which was also commended by some service users. One adult who has received a service said: 'I had a very positive experience of support from Ealing...the adoption support team were very helpful and gave me a quick response when asking questions.'

Another adopted adult said: 'I found the social worker really supportive, to the point that the contact was on a Sunday and the social worker still came along and supported me through it. The social worker made a daunting experience very easy.'

When complex tracing cannot be undertaken, the service signposts service users to AAA Norcap, an adoption support agency. The service seeks feedback from those seeking support with adoption-related issues. Feedback is used to inform service development and drive forward improvements.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The service meets the needs of an ethnically and culturally diverse community extremely well. Many different ethnic and religious groups are represented in the staff group, in management and on the adoption panel. The authority demonstrates a professional, targeted approach to recruitment.

Minority ethnic, gay and lesbian adopters and single people feel welcomed. One adoptive couple said: 'We think Ealing went well beyond the call of duty in our case. They were unfailingly supportive. We think Ealing are serious about equality and

diversity...they always treated us as valued individuals, this was a great help.'

Adopters come from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds, which reflect the needs of children in Ealing. Due to creative and targeted recruitment strategies, there has been a significant increase in the number of adopters from minority groups in the past two years. This has enabled the authority to widen the choice available in matching children. Excellent examples were seen where the authority had exercised careful judgement in placing children with adopters of different ethnicity to the child, in order to reduce delays in finding a permanent family.

The service provides a very rapid response to members of the public making contact to express an interest in adoption. The information pack is sent out immediately. Information meetings are held monthly at accessible locations and times. Social workers then visit prospective adopters who wish to continue with the process. Currently, there are three preparation courses a year, but the service plans to increase this to four. All sessions are evaluated through surveys and informal feedback.

One adopter said: 'The preparation group was good. We were then attached to a social worker, who is great. She kept the process moving, was sensitive and kept all her appointments. She has been available at all times, very frequently outside of working hours.'

Another adopter described the preparation course: 'I found it hugely challenging and thought-provoking. I learned things that stay with me still...I use them in parenting. Ealing was unfailingly professional and easy to deal with.'

The service's managers quality assure prospective adopters' reports and child permanence reports before these are submitted to the adoption panel. This ensures that only reports of the highest quality are presented, which in turn facilitates the matching process and helps to reduce delays for children and adopters.

Applications from prospective intercountry adopters are welcomed. Information meetings and preparation training for intercountry adopters take place at the Intercountry Adoption Centre. This helps to ensure that prospective adopters receive the most up-to-date specialist information. Assessments are conducted in-house by social workers with the necessary training and skills to undertake this work. Assessments of intercountry adopters are subject to the same rigorous process as for domestic adopters to ensure that the highest standards are maintained.

The adoption panel has an effective policy in place to guide the development of a central list. The central list is used to ensure that additional expertise is brought into the panel to enhance its functions. The panel is extremely well chaired by a professional, independent person. He was appointed by the directorate and has substantial experience of managing adoption panel meetings, training and consultancy.

The adoption panel is an integral part of the management monitoring process in

Ealing. The panel receives reports at three-weekly intervals, prior to every meeting, to update members on the progress of children and adopters. The adoption panel chair completes a feedback report for the social worker on the quality of the assessment and report. Social workers find the adoption panel and the feedback to be a positive and constructive experience. Feedback about the panel is sought from all other parties attending panel.

Adopters confirm that they are able to attend panel and present their views. They are welcomed and supported throughout the process. They receive verbal feedback on the day.

The majority of prospective adopters are approved within the eight months specified in the national minimum standards. When this is not possible, it is due to matters which need to be resolved. For example, health issues, bereavement or changes in circumstances often require a period of reflection before a major decision is made.

The adoption panel recommends matches for the majority of children for whom a plan for adoption has been confirmed, within six months of the agency decision maker's decision. Children who cannot be matched in this timeframe are those with special or complex needs. The agency is very proactive in seeking matches for these children and employs creative means to achieve this, including lateral thinking about the types of families that might be able to meet the needs of children with complex ethnic backgrounds.

Panel paperwork is very professionally and efficiently managed. Minutes are of exceptionally high quality and the minute taker produces these very quickly after the meeting. He uses a secure email system to ensure confidentiality. Panel members agree the minutes speedily and the agency decision maker receives them promptly. The decision is confirmed to adopters and birth families in writing within the specified timescales.

The service has a very well written Statement of Purpose, which is cross referenced to a large number of policies and procedures. The service has an excellent children's guide to adoption support and a newly revised children's guide to adoption.

All managers engaged in recruitment have undertaken safe recruitment training. Staff and panel members' files show effective recruitment practice, with all the required checks in place for employees to help ensure that they are suitable to work with children. The service is in the process of transferring all staff files to electronic format, to improve efficiency. Panel files are generally of a good standard, with robust recruitment practices in place.

The service has an exceptionally strong training programme in place. Newly qualified staff receive a thorough induction programme and there is a buddy system in place to ensure that they are effectively supported. Staff and managers value the high quality of training and it is one of the factors which attracts and retains staff. Social workers may be supported to undertake further advanced training leading to post qualifying and management awards. There is appropriate training available on

intercountry adoption and a wide range of external courses.

The adoption support team has two skilled and experienced social work assistants, who help with the administration of the letterbox exchange system. All other field staff are fully qualified in social work. Other professional advisors and consultants involved in adoption work all have relevant qualifications from their respective regulatory bodies.

Central list members receive appropriate induction into adoption panel procedures and undergo extensive training in all aspects of adoption and permanence. The agency decision makers are all qualified in social work.

Staff and managers are deeply loyal to the authority and said how much they value the clear commitment to their professional development. Staff receive effective professional supervision and this is well recorded. They value the senior managers' approachable and supportive style. There is excellent communication, facilitated by the open arrangement of the offices and by effective Information Technology systems. All staff receive annual appraisals. They have access to extremely high quality professional advice from other agencies and the LAC psychologist.

The service is led and managed to a very high standard, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. There are effective arrangements for deputisation in the event of any manager's absence. The director of children's services has led the authority for many years from very difficult past times, on a steady and sustainable trajectory of improvement. The service has now achieved outstanding outcomes for looked after and adopted children. The service's managers share a passion for improving outcomes for children. There are excellent systems in place for monitoring all aspects of the service.

Ealing is complex and diverse in terms of ethnicity, culture and first languages. This requires the local authority to make substantial use of interpreter services. All the authority's documents can be translated into other languages.

Case recording is clear and appropriate. Supervision notes are available on file for each case. The service has only received one complaint since the last inspection and this has been responded to in a sensitive and thorough manner. Resolution letters are open, honest and address the learning which the department has undertaken as a result of issues raised.

The authority occupies very good quality modern premises in the centre of Ealing. There is full access for disabled people. The building facilitates an open and accessible style of management. Although the standard of premises is not uniform across all children's and young people's teams, the facilities for staff working within the adoption service are excellent. There are plans in place to improve the facilities for the looked after children's teams.

Files are stored very securely with excellent systems in place to ensure their safety. There is provision for emergency conservation of damaged files should the need

arise. This helps to maintain the quality of stored paper, so that young people and adults may have managed access to their sensitive case file material in the future.