

London Borough of Merton Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA 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

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| Outstanding: | this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality |
| Good: | this aspect of the provision is strong |
| Satisfactory: | this aspect of the provision is sound |
| Inadequate: | this aspect of the provision is not good enough |

Service information

Brief description of the service

The adoption agency of the London Borough of Merton operates all the statutory duties it carries responsibility for under current legislation. This includes the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters; the matching and placement of children with suitable families and support to people who have been affected by adoption.

The service operates from accessible premises in Mitcham.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This inspection was a key, announced inspection. The agency is very clear about the service it provides through its comprehensive policies and procedures which give good, clear guidance to staff. It is welcoming to those who are interested in adoption and has a strong commitment to equality and diversity. Staff work well together and receive regular and effective support and supervision from the management team. The systems for the preparation and assessment of adopters ensure that children are safeguarded, the adoption panel is robust and the agency receives good scrutiny at a number of levels. The support of adopters is effective and the post adoption service to birth parents, particularly in relation to contact arrangements are good with some outstanding aspects. This ensures that the service to children and adoptive families is strong, professional and effective. The agency has appointed a new, permanent manager who had commenced his duties prior to this inspection. In addition at the time of the inspection a number of permanent staff appointments were in the process of being made both to the permanence and administrative teams. There have been many changes within the organization and these are in the process of 'bedding down'.

Some areas could be developed, improved and expanded; these include the services to birth parents prior to adoption; the more timely provision of life story books to children and the monitoring and auditing of records.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last social care inspection of the adoption service, in 2007, resulted in eight detailed actions and seven recommendations. These could be grouped together under the broad themes of management of the adoption agency including the appointment of a permanent manager to manage the service and safeguarding procedures including recruitment procedures. The agency has addressed these actions and recommendations and appropriate action has been taken with regard to

most of the shortfalls identified, this significantly improving the overall quality of service it affords to service users.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency demonstrates a clear understanding of the needs of children who require adoptive families. There is a written recruitment strategy which addresses how to meet those needs and an adoption and permanence plan has been developed for 2009/2010. The agency has a recruitment specialist and advertises for adopters in numerous publications and journals including magazines and local papers in addition to London Kids and UK Kids. The agency will also advertise in specific media when looking for particular or specialist adopters. Very few adopters wait for placements, which indicates that the agency recruits the right families for its children. Children generally do not wait long for adoptive families, this is achieved by the use of inter-agency placements when Merton adopters are not suitable. There are formalised systems in place to enable the adoption team to have an awareness of the children who may require an adoptive family and thus undertake timely planning to prevent delay. Clear assessments take place to look at sibling attachments in order to make sound decisions about separating or placing children with their brothers and sisters. The evidence seen also shows that every effort is made to place children in families which meet their cultural, religious and ethnicity needs. However, in line with the principles of 'Achieving the Right Balance', children's plans are not delayed in order to find a perfect match.

The agency is managed and staffed by appropriately qualified, suitable people. A new permanent manager is now in post and a permanent assistant team manager has been appointed. Recruitment practices are, for the most part robust and all the necessary checks are carried out. The adoption team demonstrates that they are knowledgeable, experienced, committed and hard-working. They are keen to improve the service and their own professional development. The team have been through significant staffing difficulties including the lack of permanent staff so it is testimony to their commitment that they have not become complacent. Through discussion it is evident that the new manager has already had a major impact and staff spoken to are extremely positive about the future direction of the service.

There is a formal, thorough process for preparing, assessing and approving adopters. Following an expression of interest and discussion with a duty social worker the team manager will decide whether to pursue the enquiry and invite the interested parties to an information session. The next stage is a home visit by a social worker to talk about adoption, the process and procedures. If the interested parties decide they

wish to proceed they will be asked to complete an application form prior to the assessment, training and home visits being undertaken. Adopters spoken to gave very good feedback about the training and felt it prepared them well.

The assessments are analytical and address the competences needed for parenting an adoptive child. Adopters commented that their social workers are excellent, professional, supportive and easy to talk to. The full range of checks and references are taken up and a health and safety questionnaire is completed. This has recently been revised to include areas such as guns, weapons and poisonous plants. This process ensures as far as possible that the adoptive parents are appropriately safe to care for children.

Adopters receive clear information about the matching process post approval. They are encouraged to prepare family books which are child-specific, to enable the child to learn about them in an appropriate way. There is a very good process for matching children with adoptive families, through a number of formalised meetings which address the needs of the child and the type of family which would meet those needs. Prospective adopters receive full information to enable them to make an informed decision about whether the child is right for them and at all stages of the process they are able to express any anxieties and withdraw if necessary. Adopters confirmed that the agency was very clear in giving them permission to back out at any stage with no reflection on their abilities as adoptive parents. These processes and the attitude of the staff of the agency promote secure and appropriate placements.

The agency has an appropriately constituted adoption panel which is underpinned by a comprehensive set of policies and procedures. There is a well-established pattern of adopter attendance and both staff and adopters confirmed that they were made welcome and asked appropriate questions. Adopters said that their social worker prepared them well for the panel so it was not quite as daunting an experience as it could be. The adoption panel is chaired by an experienced, independent person who has proven abilities in this area. Panel members have a good range of personal and professional experience and reflect a number of different cultures. All panel members have appropriate checks in place and have undertaken an induction, training and appraisal. They are well prepared for the panel, having read the papers in advance, pick up relevant issues and ask appropriate questions. There are good mechanisms for the feedback of any issues of concern to the agency. This promotes robust recommendations which inform the decision-making.

The panel meets regularly, with the facility to hold extra panels if necessary, and there is no evidence that children's plans are delayed through the inability to obtain a panel date. They are well-administered, papers are sent out in good time to enable panel members to read them and be prepared, the minutes are full and reflect the discussion and the reasons.

The agency decision is made in a timely way, based on the availability of full information. Adopters usually receive the notification of the agency decision swiftly, but during the course of interviewing one adopter it was evident that they did not

receive the approval letter from the agency decision maker for four weeks. The inspectors also noted that the letter sent to the approved adopters is not signed by the agency decision maker and while this is not a recommendation it would be good practise given the significance of the letter.

The agency is managed and staffed by appropriately qualified, suitable people. Recruitment practices are robust and all the necessary checks are carried out. The adoption team demonstrates that they are knowledgeable, experienced, committed and hard-working but are not complacent. They are keen to improve the service and their own professional development.

The agency has its own safeguarding procedures in place which refer to the London Safeguarding Children Board Procedures. Although the procedures make reference to historical abuse it does not make reference to adopted children. The Adoption Team confirmed that they receive regular training in child protection and had a course specifically tailored for them.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency has a well-planned, strong and committed approach to supporting its adopters, both before and after an adoption order is made. This process starts during their preparation for approval, and once approved, adopters describe their social workers as very easy to contact, supportive and visiting regularly. Systems are in place to enable approved adopters to develop their knowledge and understanding of the adoption task, through the adoption team, workshops and support groups. In addition there are social events, a children's group through the consortium and direct work with children and families through (CAMHS). The agency is also planning to run a post approval group for adopters to prepare them during the matching process and placement of a child or children. There is a systematic approach to analysing the support needs of adopters and the issues they may experience and the support packages which may need to be put into place.

The agency provides good financial support packages to its adopters to enable placements to be made and to continue. This includes ongoing financial support for children with particular needs. In addition the agency will in certain circumstances offer financial support to enable adopters to build an extension to their house.

Children placed for adoption receive a good service from CAMHS, which has a multi-disciplinary team, including specialist workers, for looked after children. This team can provide a prompt response to referrals they receive, work in partnership with social workers in both the adoption team and the children's teams and provide consultation to adopters and staff. Adopters commented that they worked well together and felt it was a 'joined up' service.

Legal and medical advice is of a good standard. The legal adviser specialises in adoption and gives useful updates to staff and the adoption panel on case law. Both

these advisers are an invaluable asset to the overall processes of adoption and adoption support.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency shows a commitment to the lifelong implications of adoption for the birth family, which is acted upon in practice. Birth parents are involved in contributing to the planning for their children and consulted about their wishes and feelings. Where possible, these are recorded on the Child Permanence Report (CPR). Children's views are also sought where appropriate and recorded on the CPR. The agency has produced an information pack entitled 'A birth parent's guide to adoption' This information pack is written in a sensitive manner and gives clear information to birth parents about the adoption process.

It is the responsibility of the child's social worker to ensure that all children have a life story book. In addition the agency has commissioned two additional workers to ensure this work is prioritised and completed on time. The agency provides life story book training and has a range of age appropriate books, toys and activities for direct work with children. Cameras and laptops are available for use with children. The expectation is for the life story book to be ready for the child once they are placed with their adoptive family. However, this is not always the case and some delay has been identified.

There is evidence to show that children are provided with up to date information about the birth family by the maintenance of the post box system and documented by the post box contact arrangements paperwork.

The permanence service is fully committed to developing this work and is supported by a qualified team manager who although relatively new in post displays a wealth of knowledge and experience.

There is a good understanding about the importance of maintaining a child's heritage. This is facilitated, where appropriate by one-off meetings between adopters and birth families, when information is shared about the child's family of origin for the child's benefit in the future. The arrangements for both indirect and direct contact are very good. There is a robust letterbox system in place, which is underpinned by good procedures and guidance on letter-writing for adopters and birth parents. The team will assist with letter-writing and this can also provide an avenue for both birth parents and adopters to access support in relation to other matters. The permanence team has recently started a group for adopters which is proving successful. In addition the agency arranges an annual 'fun day' for all adoptive parents.

The post adoption team are involved in a number of direct contacts which they supervise. These arrangements are underpinned by comprehensive agreements about expectations of behaviour and conduct, to facilitate the smooth running of these situations. The visits are undertaken sensitively and professionally to ensure that contact is a positive experience for all parties and that it continues for the child's

benefit. Birth family members expressed a high degree of satisfaction with their experience of direct contact and were full of praise for the social workers' support and willingness to spend time at weekends and holidays to promote and facilitate the arrangements. There is clear respect for, and consideration of the welfare of, all parties.

The agency also undertakes work with adopted adults, including birth records counselling, intermediary services and support for reunions. Again, the evidence seen shows this to be undertaken with particular sensitivity and an awareness of the needs of all involved.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The agency has a written statement of purpose which has been approved by the leader of the council in June 2009. This clearly sets out the aims and objectives of the adoption service and is underpinned by a comprehensive set of policies and procedures which are of a very high standard. The children's guide, given in conjunction with the complaints leaflet, meets the requirements of the regulations and the agency has also developed a guide to adoption for children under 10. In addition the agency has developed a children's guide to the national adoption standards and statement of purpose.

People who are interested in knowing more about becoming adoptive parents are given clear written information about the process and the needs of children who are requiring an adoptive family. They report that Merton is very welcoming and has a good understanding of diversity issues.

The adoption agency is well managed by people who are skilled, knowledgeable, qualified, experienced and committed to the service. Management arrangements are well defined with clear roles, responsibilities and lines of accountability. Staff are well supported through regular supervision, team meetings and access to training.

The executive side of the council has good mechanisms for keeping itself informed through six monthly information reports, regular meetings with senior officers and the corporate parenting panel. The adoption service provides a report twice a year on its management and outcomes. These mechanisms ensure there is good and effective scrutiny of the service.

The staffing levels are adequate for the provision of the service. However the agency has become dependent on temporary and agency staff including the manager of the

service. This has now been partly addressed by senior management with the appointment of a well qualified and experienced permanent manager who had commenced his duties prior to the inspection. In addition the agency is in the process of recruiting a permanent assistant team manager and social workers. The agency has also had difficulty in recruiting both permanent and agency administrative staff although at the time of the inspection they were in the process of recruiting to permanent posts. The panel administrator is relatively new to the adoption service although she has previous experience as the fostering panel administrator.

Staff state that Merton is a good place to work and that they "really like working there", being child-focussed and supportive, and many staff, particularly those at a senior level have worked for the borough for a number of years. This has enabled senior management to offer the permanence team ongoing support with regard to staffing and management issues which have now been satisfactorily addressed.

Case records on adopters and children are reasonably well organised and allow relatively easy access to information, as they are indexed, provide basic information and chronologies at the front. Records are for the most part signed, dated and legible and there is evidence of decisions signed off by management. However it is evident that files need to be monitored in a more robust and efficient manner as it was difficult to evidence certain documentation. In addition it was noted by the inspector that observed an adoption panel that there were a number of typographical and other factual errors on some prospective adopters' reports. Records are stored securely and there are procedures in place for access.

The premises are for the most part unsuitable for the needs of the service although they are identifiable and accessible to the public. The office for the adoption team is effectively a corridor with furniture forming some sort of wall. Staff spoken to stated that it was almost impossible to concentrate, that working conditions are poor and that conversations can be overheard. However one improvement has been that staff are now able to work at home although they are not supplied with laptops or other information technology equipment. Likewise the interview rooms that permanence staff use to meet with service users are very bleak and staff spoken to commented that it is very difficult to see clients who may be upset or feeling vulnerable in such accommodation which in some cases has no natural light or ventilation. Staff are encouraged to use the facilities on offer at a local family centre but these are heavily booked.

Information technology and administrative support services are provided corporately and data is backed up according to industry standards. Adoption records are archived within storage facilities designed to keep the most sensitive data and documents are safe and protected from environmental risks. The agency has a disaster recovery plan which refers to the provision of premises and safeguarding and backup of records.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good The efforts to recruit a diverse range of adopters is impressive and creative wherever possible, the staff team is seen to

promote diversity and there is a strong approach throughout the authority to promote inclusion.

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 all prospective adopter's reports and child's permanence reports are monitored by a senior member of staff to ensure they are accurate and in so far as possible free of errors.
- ensure the adoption agency has written procedures for dealing with allegations of historical abuse which may be made by service users during the course of service provision.
- ensure that life story books and later life letters are available for children in a timely way when they are placed for adoption.
- ensure that birth parents have access to a support worker independent of the child's social worker from the time adoption is identified as a plan for the child.
- review the meeting rooms used by the adoption team to ensure they are suitable and meet the needs of the service.
- develop a more formalised approach to file audits to ensure shortfalls are rectified and addressed.
- review the office accommodation that is currently used by the adoption team to ensure that it is adequate for the needs of the service.