

London Borough of Waltham Forest Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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Inspector	Heather Chaplin / Mike Stapley
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Setting address	London Borough of Waltham Forest, Juniper House, 221 Hoe Street, LONDON, E17 9PH
Telephone number	02084961621
Email	
Registered person	London Borough of Waltham Forest
Registered manager	Jane Anderson
Responsible individual	Alison Murphy
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Service information

Brief description of the service

The London Borough of Waltham Forest provides a local authority service adoption service which is located within children's services. The service recruits and assesses domestic and intercountry adopters, identifies children for adoption, matches them with appropriate adopters and offers post-adoption support to adoptive families. The agency also provides a service to birth family members and adults affected by adoption. Some services are provided through a range of partnerships with specialist agencies.

Fifteen children have been adopted since April 2012, with another 12 children currently in placement. 26 children are waiting for an adoptive placement, nine of whom have had possible links identified. Eleven adopters have been approved since April 2012. The service is currently working with a further 34 adopters and prospective adopters.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

Good: a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

Adequate: a service that only meets minimum requirements

Inadequate: a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **adequate**.

This inspection found that although good progress has been made on the part of the adoption team in reducing delay, there is still some way to go for the looked-after children's service as a whole. The looked after children's service has struggled for some years to meet timescales in terms of identifying children for whom adoption is in their best interests. This has contributed to an overall judgement of adequate. The Department for Education (DfE) issued an improvement notice in December 2011 and the authority is required to address all the issues identified.

The authority has restructured, appointed a series of interim managers to lead the improvement process and has worked hard to address the issues identified. This inspection has shown that under knowledgeable and inspirational leadership, the adoption service has significantly reduced previous levels of delay for children and for prospective adopters. Placements are currently found for the large majority, 86 per cent, of children within the statutory timescales, but this is a relatively recent

development over the past six months. Prior to that, the figure was 57 per cent, well below the national average of 74 per cent.

This inspection did identify some pockets of very good practice across the range of services provided by the adoption and adoption support teams. Waltham Forest provides skilled and professional adoption teams which generally meet the needs of children and young people in the borough who have agreed plan for adoption. The panel is effective and very well managed. This helps to ensure that the service approves high-quality adopters who can meet the needs of the children placed with them. Prospective adopters are carefully assessed and well prepared for the task. They receive good levels of support. The service also considers the needs of their support network of families and friends. Adopters and external agencies responded very positively to questionnaire surveys.

The adoption agency is now much more effective in identifying, assessing and approving adequate numbers of families who have the skills to meet the needs of children within the borough. As part of a consortium of adoption services there is a reciprocal arrangement between adoption consortium members. This means that if there is no immediate match for a child other local authority adopters can be considered as potential adoptive parents.

The service has effective commissioning arrangements with a number of voluntary adoption agencies and adoption support agencies, in order to provide services to adults and children affected by adoption.

The majority of outcomes for children are good. With the exception of some life story work and later life letters, children receive a safe and sensitively-delivered service. Children are very well matched in their adoptive placements. They do well in education and receive very good post-adoption support services.

Children and young people are kept safe in their adoptive placements. They contribute to plans for their care and some good examples of consultation were seen. The service is well aware that there is room for further development in consultation.

Leaders and managers are passionate about the importance of adoption and have made concerted efforts to drive forward improvements. For example, most of the recommendations from the last inspection have been fully addressed and all have been at least partially met. Tracking systems have been introduced to help to avoid delays for children and adopters.

Social workers and fellow professionals from other fields praised the skills and commitment of the interim and permanent managers of this service. The interim head of service has achieved a great deal in a relatively short period of time and is currently involved in recruiting managers to lead the service into the next phase of improvement. However, with very few permanent managers in post, it is not possible to be confident that the improvements will be either consistent or sustained. Although managers are currently interviewing candidates for some of these posts, it

is difficult to be confident that the positive progress made by the present post holders will be maintained.

The shortfalls in the service's provision relate mainly to the challenges faced by the local authority's children in care teams. Life story work and later life letters are not always completed on time and the quality is variable. A previous inspection issue relating to child permanence reports has been largely addressed and training provision to improve this area of the work is due to start soon after the inspection. There are also shortfalls in the staff and panel member recruitment files, although most areas of recruitment are well managed and this shortfall does not impact significantly on young people's safety. This was also the subject of a recommendation at the last inspection. This matter had started to be addressed, but due to management changes and restructuring, the work was not completed.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure that the completed life story book and later life letter are given to the child and the adopters within 10 working days of the adoption ceremony (NMS 2.7 and 2.8)
- ensure that birth family members are given access to and actively encouraged to use a support service from the time that adoption is identified as the plan for the child. Ensure that this information is provided again at a later date or dates, to allow for individual differences in readiness to make use of the services on offer (NMS 12.4)
- carry out recruitment and suitability checks for staff, volunteers and members of the central list which includes at least two written references, preferably one from a current employer, and where possible a statement from each referee as to their opinion of the person's suitability to work with children (NMS 21.3 (d))
- ensure that the agency is managed effectively and efficiently, delivering a good quality service to meet the needs of children and other service users; in particular, continue with efforts to recruit suitable permanent managers in children's services (NMS 25.1)
- ensure that the Business Continuity Plan makes provision for the emergency conservation of water-damaged records to safeguard them for service users (NMS 28.3)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **adequate**.

Children and young people are well prepared for their placements. They spoke about

receiving support from their social workers and being given helpful information about their adoptive families. They described how they were introduced to their adopters gradually, so that they felt comfortable before moving into their adoptive homes. This helps children to feel safe and secure with their new families and increases the chances that they will be able to form attachments.

Children and young people with an agreed plan for adoption are generally placed promptly with prospective adopters, helping to ensure that time spent in care is kept to a minimum. The local authority did not have an adequate record of prompt placements, but this is an improving picture. For example, over the last three years, 57 per cent of children have been placed within 12 months of a decision that they should be placed for adoption. However, over the last six months, restructuring of the service and much more proactive management of tracking systems has ensured that a large majority of children and young people, 86 per cent, have been placed within 12 months of this decision.

Some children are placed very quickly. For example, one child was placed and adopted within seven months of their 'best interests' decision. The service works with specialist voluntary adoption agencies to support concurrent planning. This helps significantly in reducing delays for children. One adopter said, in their questionnaire: 'We would like to say that once the placement order was granted, we were rushed to the matching panel within approximately two weeks. We were very pleased. Everyone worked very hard to ensure things were done as quickly as possible, with all procedures followed and no short cuts. Also, we got our child placed within one year of being approved.'

One young person made a short DVD, in which she asked to be placed for adoption. As the result of an advertising campaign, this young person found an adoptive family at the age of 12 and now enjoys a happy and successful placement. This shows that children are listened to and that the authority is responsive to their needs.

Children and young people have their health care needs met while they are looked after and placed for adoption. The service has two medical advisors who attend the adoption panel and ensure that children's healthcare needs are identified and followed up. A recently appointed looked-after children's (LAC) nurse works hard with a number of different agencies and professionals, including the local child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS), to help to improve outcomes for children.

Children and young people of school age have made very good progress in education. One adopter spoke about her child who had been rated a 'low achiever' in school. Her adopters were assertive in supporting her educational needs, which resulted in a substantial improvement in her attainment. This young person is now one of the highest achievers in her year and has received an award for her progress in school. Other young people talked with pride and confidence about their educational achievements. It is clear that adopters work hard to help children feel secure and this provides the stability required to support educational attainment.

Children's educational needs are supported by the virtual headteacher and his team.

He works effectively with other agencies to drive up standards in education for looked-after children. For example, the virtual headteacher is addressing shortfalls he has identified in the overall quality of personal education plans. He meets regularly with other professionals to ensure that children's educational needs remain foremost in departmental planning and action.

Children, young people and their adoptive families have access to a range of adoption support services, coordinated by an experienced and exceptionally well-qualified adoption support team. Children's psychological needs are well met. For example, they may be fast-tracked to receive prompt services from the local CAMHS team, which helps to support their adoptive placements.

Children and young people are safe and secure in their adoptive families. They benefit from effective risk assessments and the statutory checks that take place to ensure that their homes and families provide a safe environment. Children and young people spoke about their sense of permanence with their new families and how it was good to know that they did not have to move on again.

Although outcomes for most children are very positive, this has been achieved through assertive and dedicated management and hard work within the adoption team and by education and healthcare professionals.

Quality of service

The quality of the service is **adequate**.

All adopters who responded to the questionnaire survey were satisfied with the welcome and quality of information received. Written information is of an exceptionally high standard and is sent out to enquirers promptly. One adopter commented that Waltham Forest provides 'friendly and welcoming social workers, with a caring but realistic approach.'

An overwhelming majority of adopters who responded to the survey, rated the overall experience of using the service as either 'good' or 'excellent'. This shows that despite the historical difficulties experienced by this service in providing positive outcomes for all looked-after children, the service to adopters is of a good standard.

The preparation, assessment and support of prospective adopters provide sufficient information and support to enable them to understand children's needs. Some adopters said: 'We would recommend our agency to others. The social workers seem experienced and to have worked for the agency for some time, so that there is an impression of good continuity of employment and team work. We thought the preparation group was good. We have also attended evenings for support group members (wider family and friends), which we feel are useful.' Prospective adopters who embarked on the approval process relatively recently, commented: 'We have found all staff to be very helpful so far. We have no problems with how it has been handled to date.'

A number of professionals interviewed and surveyed, commented that the quality of child permanence reports still requires improvement. This was a recommendation from the last inspection. The agency's managers are well aware that this is an issue. Positive links between the adoption team and the looked-after children's teams have helped to bring about some improvement and the child permanence reports examined during the inspection were of an adequate quality. The service's managers have a clear plan in place to bring about further improvements in these reports. The authority has obtained government funding to support their improvement plan, which will be used in part to provide essential staff training in this area. In view of the fact that training was due to start on the day following the inspection, the inspectors concluded that progress is under way, so the recommendation has not been repeated.

Prospective adopters' reports are completed within the specialist adoption team. Hence, they are of better overall quality than the child permanence reports and contain all the required information, combined with effective analysis of the prospective adopters' strengths and any areas of vulnerability.

Although a small number of adopters commented on the length of time taken to effect a match, this is likely to be related to the process as a whole and is not specific to Waltham Forest. Most adopters were satisfied with the length of time taken from their application to their approval. The service is currently just below the target figure of eight months from application to approval. Some adopters are approved well within this time. Managers said that when there is a slight delay, it is often at the adopters' request; for example, to allow time to move house.

Adopters were pleased with the quality and quantity of information received about their children. The service has specialist family finders, who do exceptionally well in addressing children's diverse individual needs, including needs relating to their ethnic origin. They work hard to place children with adopters where there is a good ethnic match, even if this means that the service's managers have to obtain a placement from a voluntary adoption agency. The local authority, despite severe financial constraints, has maintained this commitment to children by funding such placements.

If finding an exact ethnic match proves very difficult or time-consuming, the service will match with adopters of different ethnicity, provided that other important needs can be met. This helps to reduce delay for children. Children are placed with adopters who can meet their religious and cultural needs. One adopter said: 'We believe the family finder social worker did great work to ensure a correct match and ensure we had full information, well as much as was available given the history and child's background.'

The adoption panel provides good quality reports to the service every six months. Reports are a frank appraisal of the agency's progress and they identify any shortfalls in an open and transparent manner.

Birth family members are invited to receive a support service from a voluntary adoption agency, commissioned by the local authority. They are also given

information about an adoption support agency which can provide help and advice about adoption. Birth parents are informed of the services through leaflets sent to them at the time that adoption is identified as the plan for the child. Although this is good practice, birth parents are often in a distressed state at this time and may need to be approached several times during the process to remind them that there is a service for them. Currently, this is not routinely done.

Many children receive good quality life story work from their social workers. Some examples were seen of sensitive and appropriate life story books and also, helpful and informative later life and other letters from social workers. One particular letter from a student social worker was included in the life story book. The letter explained how the student had worked with the child to help them understand their heritage; this is good practice.

Some life story books have not been completed on time. One child received a book of poor quality, which then had to be redone to a higher standard by a member of the adoption team. One adopter said: 'We were very satisfied with the service and are delighted with the beautiful baby we have adopted. All social workers we dealt with provided us great support along the way...although having said that, we are still waiting for the life story from child's social worker.' Later life letters are also not always delivered in a timely manner.

This service provides a high standard of adoption support for children and families. This starts from the time of the placement. One parent said: '...prior to (the Adoption Order) we had regular visits and also got a lot of support from social workers the first weekend and the week when we brought our six month old baby home; this was really appreciated.'

All adopters interviewed were aware that there is guidance and support available. The service provides a range of events for adopters and children, in addition to accessing swift help from CAMHS when required. One family was supported by a significant period of counselling from an adoption support service. This helps to reduce the risk of placement breakdown. The service has experienced one disruption in the period under review during this inspection. Disruptions are extremely difficult for all concerned, but the agency has learned from this experience.

The agency provides a good service to adults affected by adoption. There is no waiting list, which means that adults seeking counselling with regard to their birth records are allocated a social worker straight away.

All social workers in the adoption support team are trained in counselling or psychotherapy, so they are clear about their professional boundaries and responsibilities to work in a safe manner in such a sensitive situation. The service also provides some basic level intermediary work, including tracing. If more time is required than can be provided within the service, the service user is referred to an adoption support agency.

Safeguarding children and young people

The service is **adequate** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

Children enjoy safe and happy placements with their adoptive families. Robust health and safety checks ensure that all the family homes provide appropriate environments for young children.

Children enjoy excellent relationships with their adoptive families. They feel able to speak freely with their parents and they can share any worries that they may have. Adopters spoke about how they advocate for their children to help keep them safe from discrimination and unhelpful attitudes. Children are visited regularly by their social workers in the early stages of their placements. Adopters also receive plenty of support at this sensitive time.

The service has suitable guides to adoption and adoption support designed for children of different ages and abilities. These guides contain contact details for the office of the Children's Rights Director, to help children seek external help and advice should they need to do so.

Adopters are subject to a thorough and detailed recruitment and assessment process. They receive an effective preparation training, which includes child safeguarding and any risks posed through the internet. Adopters said that they receive good quality information on the impact of abuse and neglect on their children's attachments, behaviour and sense of security.

Adopters confirmed that contact arrangements are clear and well managed. The service has a dedicated team who manage all contact arrangements, which works very effectively. They also make use of a specialist agency whose adopters are willing and able to manage complex contacts with birth family members. This provides very good opportunities for children to maintain contact with birth family members in a safe environment.

There is an adequate process for the recruitment of staff. Staff files are well-organised, with a clear, equal opportunities-based recruitment process. However, not all staff and panel member's files viewed showed that the required information is gained in every case to ensure the suitability of each staff member; this could mean that unsuitable people are employed to work within the adoption service. The staff group is ethnically diverse and it is good that there are male staff in post, as well as female staff. This shows that the equal opportunities policy is effective.

The service has received one allegation in relation to a potential child protection concern. This was handled sensitively and appropriately. The service uses the Pan-London child protection procedures, which are available online. The procedures contain reference to alleged abuse which took place in the distant past and make provision for this to be appropriately investigated. The service's own procedures were updated during the month of this inspection, to provide an effective reference for staff.

Birth records counselling is provided following a careful assessment of the person's vulnerabilities. For extensive tracing and intermediary work, the service uses a local adoption support agency with a good reputation for providing a quality service and safeguarding service users appropriately.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the local authority adoption agency are **adequate**.

The service is working hard to ensure that services to children are unified. For example, the adoption team provides support to colleagues undertaking sensitive work with children in relation to permanence. Family finders have been introduced to help children's social workers to identify suitable matches and the adoption teams are seen as valued resources. However, the issues endemic in the looked after children's service as a whole have impacted on this inspection.

The adoption service's significant progress in reducing delays, once it has been decided that adoption is the plan for a child, is due to a commitment to improve, creative and proactive leadership from the interim head of service and the two adoption team managers. There has also been a great deal of hard work on the part of the adoption service's social work teams, who are enthusiastic and dedicated. The service has developed strong and sustainable networks with other agencies, all of which provided positive feedback on the local authority as a partner agency. The partner agencies are also aware of the necessity to reduce delay for children and young people and work collaboratively to achieve this objective.

The management team has focused on driving down the delays by implementing effective tracking systems, working with other agencies and services to improve outcomes for children and funding externally provided placements when these provide the best match in a short timescale. The authority has supported this work by continuing to finance external placements at a time of economic constraint.

Timescales are all carefully monitored through a robust management structure. However, the deputy director role, head of service and the independent reviewing officers' line manager are all interim. Several professionals expressed concern about the high number of interim managers in the authority. Although the quality of the interim managers' work is not in question, the temporary nature of many posts means that it may prove difficult to achieve consistency in monitoring over time.

A year ago, there was a shortage of adopters who could be matched without delay to children in the borough. The local authority was obliged to employ increased use of voluntary adoption agencies to provide placements. Recruitment of adopters has improved considerably in the last year and is now much more responsive. This is due to changes in the structure of the teams that means that resources in the adoption team have been freed up in order to spend more social work time on recruitment and assessment.

The adoption team has worked very hard to recruit suitable adopters for children in Waltham Forest, which is ethnically extremely diverse, with 48 per cent of children from minority ethnic backgrounds. The service has targeted adopters from the gay, lesbian and bisexual communities and is beginning to develop a good reputation for its anti-discriminatory practice in this area. This has resulted in a number of enquiries from the word-of-mouth route. The last two panel meetings have recommended for approval several prospective adopters from eastern European backgrounds. This means that the choice of potential adopters for children is widening and this leads to better quality matches. The service still goes to external agencies if there is an immediate direct match that would mean that there was no delay for the child.

The agency has a clear Statement of Purpose which accurately describes the service provided. Prospective adopters can access information through the local authority's website and from very high quality written information. The service produces guides in appropriate formats to adoption and adoption support, designed for children and young people, adopted adults and birth family members. These contain all the required information to enable people to make choices or obtain further advice when required.

The service has forged good links with a number of other agencies and services. For example, the looked after children's nurse, the virtual head teacher and CAMHS all provide a valuable service and work together with the adoption teams to support children's needs. The service has a number of commissioning arrangements with voluntary adoption agencies and adoption support agencies, for example, to provide therapeutic support to adoptive families.

The adoption panel chair produces a robust report every six months, to inform the leadership of the service's progress, strengths and areas for development. In addition, the service has commissioned external and internal audits to identify shortfalls and assist in furthering the improvement plan. This demonstrates the leadership's commitment to improvement.

The service is generally sufficiently well-resourced to provide an effective service to children and young people as well as to adult service users. However, the number of locum and interim posts in the management structure does mean that the changes in structure, culture and practice have yet to be fully embedded.

Staff confirm that they are well supported through an internal and external training programme. Staff in the adoption teams receive good quality supervision from the two team managers.

Recording is generally clear and up to date. Records are secured within the office and the archived files are off site. There is now a risk assessment in place which covers some risks to archived files, which was a recommendation from the last inspection, but it does not include specific emergency action to be taken in the event of damage to records.

There were 11 recommendations made at the last inspection. The majority of these

have been actioned. In all cases, some progress has been made. None of the recommendations that require further work impact directly on young people's welfare or safety.

A number of recommendations have been actioned in full. The formal application is now taken in advance of the preparation group; prospective adopters confirmed that they are kept informed about the process at all stages and the service now has appropriate safeguarding policies in place. Birth parents are offered support services at an early stage in the adoption process; there are now clear procedures for monitoring the agency and adoption methodology now includes contingency planning and clear time scales.

Information from birth family members is collated and passed on to the child, but not always promptly.

Child permanence reports have improved, but inspectors were told by several different professionals that the quality of these are still an issue. Staff and panel recruitment documentation is still not all in place, a shortfall which is governed by regulation. The management team are keen to action these matters without further delay and embarked on this process during the inspection.

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 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for local authority adoption agencies.