

London Borough of Croydon Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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Inspector	Mike Stapley
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Date of last inspection	08/03/2012

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Service information

Brief description of the service

The adoption agency of the London Borough of Croydon undertakes all statutory work associated with adoption. This includes the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adoptive families and the matching of children with suitable families. It also provides support to all people affected by adoption including providing support to placements; post adoption support including support for adopted adults and birth records counselling; and support for birth relatives. The assessment of people looking to adopt a child from overseas is commissioned from an independent agency.

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 **good**.

This is a good and effective adoption agency, which has worked hard over the past 12 months to improve areas of practice and the timeliness of placements. Outcomes for children and young people are good and there is a proactive and systematic approach to matching and family finding. Good support systems result in stable and secure placements. Adopters, children's social workers and other stakeholders are extremely positive about the service.

There is effective collaboration with other agencies and support services which ensures children's needs, particularly in relation to their health, psychological well-being and education, are supported. There is a clear approach to safeguarding which promotes children's overall safety.

The agency is committed to adoption as a positive placement choice for all children, and has introduced robust tracking and monitoring systems to ensure adoption is always considered. Croydon is ambitious to offer equality of opportunity for all children; including older children, children with disabilities and large sibling groups. Since the previous inspection Croydon has made progress in reducing the time that children wait for adoptive placements. This is being achieved, with a level of success, through introducing measures to track children through the system and by taking

action when there is unnecessary delay for them.

Children are involved in their plans, and the sensitive approach of social workers ensures they always understand what is happening to them. There are systems in place to ensure the wishes and feelings of children are appropriately recorded and acted upon when appropriate. However this does not happen in all cases and is an area of development. Children's permanency records have improved significantly following training and support from managers. Life story work and later life letters are produced in a timely way and are appropriately written. The management team, who for the most part are relatively new to the agency, are very experienced well qualified and are drivers for change. All of them have a clear understanding of the work that is necessary to continue the improvement that has taken place and they have a real determination to 'get it right' for children in Croydon. Staff are skilled, experienced and show a real commitment to improving outcomes for children.

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Children and young people are well prepared for their placements. There have been no disruptions for children in the last three years. Children's wishes and feelings are taken into consideration. Adopters spoken to said the introductions were thorough and sensitive to the needs of the children. Foster carers also help to prepare children for their future forever family by supporting children. Foster carers work very closely with adopters to ensure the child is well prepared for their new family. Social Workers spend a great deal of time with children and use a variety of methods to prepare for the new placement. They encourage children to talk about their likes and dislikes and for younger children they will spend time with the children using toys and games, depending on the understanding of the child. Children are gradually introduced to their adoptive family so that they feel comfortable when moving to their new home. This helps children to feel safe and secure with their new families and increases the chances that they will be able to form positive 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 promptness of placements is improving. For example from 1 April 2011 to the end of March 2012 forty-six per cent of children have been placed within twelve months of a decision that they should be placed for adoption. However at that time a substantial number of children requiring adoptive placements had a disability which meant that it took longer than usual to find a permanent home for them. During the last eight months of 2012 sixty per cent of children have been placed within twelve months which is a significant improvement on the previous twelve months. In addition seven children have been linked to adoptive families and were planned to move have a timely to placements after the Christmas period.

Some children with complex medical and health needs have been found adoptive families in good time. This results from concerted effort put into finding adoptive placements for children with disabilities. For example one child who had been placed

with foster carers for some considerable time that had a disability and was placed with carers within eight months of them expressing an interest. A well-structured support plan is in place to meet the needs of the child who has flourished in his new placement.

Children and young people have their health care needs met while they are looked after and placed for adoption. The service has a medical advisor who attends the adoption panel and ensures that children's healthcare needs are identified and followed up. The looked-after children's nurse works in partnership 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 make very good progress in education at key stages. One child was at a special school when placed with an adoptive family; he is now in mainstream school with additional support for his condition. His reading and understanding has really improved. Adopters work hard to help children feel secure and this provides the stability required to support educational attainment.

Children, young people and their adoptive families benefit from a range of adoption support services, coordinated by an experienced and exceptionally well-qualified psychotherapist. Children's psychological needs are reasonably well met through the local CAMHS team, which helps to support their adoptive placements.

Children and young people are safe and secure in their adoptive families. Effective risk assessments and the statutory checks ensure that their homes and families provide a safe environment.

Quality of service

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

Adopters are very happy with the welcome they received and the information that was sent out to them. The information pack that is sent out to potential adopters is well written and of a high standard and usually sent out on the same day of enquiry. One adopter commented that Croydon provides, 'friendly and welcoming social workers, with a caring but realistic approach'. An overwhelming majority of adopters found their experience of using the agency very positive and spoke very highly of the adoption agency. Adopters commented that it was good that the agency had frequent information evenings so that they did not have to wait long to attend. The preparation, assessment and support of prospective adopters provides sufficient information and support to enable them to understand children's needs. Adopter's feedback about preparation training was very positive. One adopter said, 'we would certainly recommend Croydon to others. The social workers seem to be very experienced and our accessing social worker was very experienced and had worked for the agency for many years we would certainly recommend our agency to others'. While another commented, 'We thought the preparation group was very good and informative. It was good to hear from an adopter as she told us what adoption was really like'.

The majority of child permanence reports are of a good standard. Social workers have benefited from a training course on writing child permanence reports. There are very timely assessments of applicants, with all recent applicants being brought to panel within the eight month timescale.

There is a very effective adoption panel. The panel is made up of members from different walks of life; this helps to ensure that a full discussion of all relevant aspects takes place, which is particularly effective when matches are being considered. The panel chair ensures that all panel members who wish to contribute are able to do so in a positive manner. The agency provides panel members with regular training which is well supported by panel members. This helps to ensure they are up-to-date with any changes in legislation and current trends and development within the field of adoption. The panel takes its quality assurance role very seriously and monitors children's plans as appropriate and will feedback any concerns to managers, in addition to commenting on any issues of delay. There is excellent administrative support, panel papers are sent out in a timely manner and minutes of panel meetings are completed and approved by the panel chair within seven days

Good and effective support is provided to children. Specialist support has been put in place for children in need and this includes arranging for physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech and language to ensure children are given the support and development they need. The local authority will fund adaptations for those children who need them and support carers in the purchase of a vehicle if necessary. Children's educational needs are supported by the virtual headteacher and her team. She works in partnership with other agencies to drive up standards in education for looked-after children. For example, training has taken place for designated teachers which was very well attended. This has helped not only develop positive links with schools but enabled designated teachers to have a much better understanding of the needs of adopted children. The virtual headteacher is addressing shortfalls she has identified in the overall quality of personal education plans. She meets regularly with other professionals to ensure that children's educational needs remain foremost in departmental planning and action.

Effective support is provided throughout adoption to the whole adoptive family, birth relatives, and children and young people as appropriate either by the agencies adoption support social workers or external agencies. On-going training is provided post adoption; this includes twice yearly training on a range of topics or example: managing challenging behaviour, adoption conversations, and contact and internet safety.

The agency supports birth parents well throughout the adoption process. It ensures they are aware of decisions taken at reviews and the content of the child permanence reports. Birth parents are asked to contribute to their wishes and feelings to the process. A local voluntary adoption agency is commissioned to provide support for birth parents and relatives although the take-up rate of this is relatively low.

The agency has a specialist worker who undertakes birth records counselling and at the time of the inspection there wasn't a waiting list for this service. However they do not undertake intermediary work and 'sign post' those interested to a local voluntary adoption agency.

The quality of prospective adoption reports is of a high standard and this is reinforced by a robust quality assurance system with additional input from the agency's adoption panel advisor.

Family finding and matching are very well considered. Family finders are allocated at an early stage to prevent delay. This also enables them to have time to gain a good knowledge of all the child's needs, including those related to faith, ability and ethnicity, to inform an appropriate match with adopters. This is formalised by a documented matching meeting, which not only ensures that all needs have been identified and can be met, but also provides a clear record of the decision making for the child in the future. The agency is proactive in identifying potential matches at a very early stage, which helps to prevent delay.

The process of matching and family finding is timely and supported through matching meetings which help to identify children's needs at an early stage. This helps to ensure that children are matched in a timely manner and without delay. The agency ensures that children's needs including faith, ethnicity and disability are duly considered and shared with the adopters which helps adopters have a clear understanding of the children's needs.

Life story books are timely and for the most part are of a high standard. These are completed by the children's social workers with support from foster carers. Social workers are supported to undertake life story books through appropriate training and support from managers. Later life letters are well written, they are clear and sensitive, giving the child a picture of their early childhood and the reasons for adoption.

Support and contact arrangements are well considered to meet the needs of the child. The agency facilitates direct contact as appropriate although the main form of contact is through the letterbox system the agency has in place. Birth parents commented that they are supported by social workers in writing to their adopted child. The agency ensures letters sent to adopted children are appropriate and written in a way that children can understand.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Children are safe and feel safe. The agency places children's safety and well-being at the centre of everything it does. Children are placed with adoptive families who are well prepared for the task of adoptive parenting and keeping them safe.

Adopters are subject to a thorough and detailed recruitment and assessment process. They receive effective preparation training in which safeguarding,

attachment and managing behaviour form a significant part of the preparation course and on-going training ensures adopters have a thorough knowledge of how to promote all aspects of safety. The preparation course includes issues of social networking and internet usage. 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. Documentation about children when first placed gives adopters all the information they need to keep everybody safe. This enables them to put appropriate strategies in place to help deal with any situations.

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.

Children and young people have a number of avenues of support to access guidance and share any concerns or worries. The service has suitable guides about adoption and adoption support designed for children of different ages and abilities. These guides contain contact detail of the office of the Children's Rights Director, to help children seek external help and advice should they need to do so. Children know they can contact social workers at the agency if they have any concerns or worries that they do not wish to share with their adoptive parents. This contact is supported and supplemented through the social events throughout the year which the majority of social workers attend. There are also support groups for teenagers which provide another avenue if young people have any concerns or issues that they would like to talk about.

Recruitment practices are robust for all members of staff and those panel members on the central list. This ensures that only those people assessed as safe are able to work with children and service users do so.

The agency has not had any allegations of a safeguarding nature since the last inspection. However all managers and social workers have a clear understanding of safeguarding and historical abuse.

Birth records counselling is provided following a careful assessment of the person's vulnerabilities. The agency does not undertake tracing and service users are signposted to a national adoption support agency which has a good reputation for providing an excellent service.

Leadership and management

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

There have been significant developments and improvements since the last

inspection. All the recommendations from the previous inspection have been addressed, providing a safer and more effective service with improved outcomes for children. There are very clear arrangements in place for identifying children who may benefit from adoption. These arrangements have recently been further strengthened. The authority has relatively low numbers of children leaving care as a result of adoption, two per cent compared with the statistical neighbours' eight per cent. However almost half of looked after children in Croydon are unaccompanied asylum seekers. This has a significant impact on the number of children who may be identified for adoption, given that the age profile of unaccompanied asylum seekers.

The appointment of a new director and senior managers within the agency has significantly improved the number of adoptions and the number of people coming forward who want to be assessed as adopters. The introduction of an adoption monitoring group which is overseen by senior managers ensures that children for whom adoption is the right plan are identified at an early stage. This helps to reduce delay. No child, whatever their individual characteristics, is automatically excluded from consideration. Children placed for adoption in the last year include five sibling groups and nine children with disabilities. Adoption is seen as a priority by this agency and adoption is seen as central to the core of the work the authority does with looked after children.

There is a well-planned strategy to ensure that there are sufficient adopters to meet the needs of children. During the last eight months twenty families have been approved by the agency as suitable to adopt and all assessments were carried out within eight months. The adoption team is particularly successful in helping applicants and approved adopters explore and widen their initial criteria in relation to the children they can successfully parent. For example, adopters have been enabled to consider children with profound disabilities one who has made very good progress with his forever family. Adopters have also been found in a timely way for five sibling groups. The agency will also advertise nationally in order to find families for children that are difficult to place.

Senior managers demonstrate a real commitment to adoption setting realistic yet ambitious targets to improve and develop the service and for the number of children that can be adopted. The agency now has information evenings once every month and preparation courses are arranged six times a year. This means that potential adopters don't have to wait long for a place on a preparation course. There is real commitment on behalf of the agency to make significant improvements to service delivery and these changes have already begun to take place. For example, the timeliness of permanence planning has improved and the timeliness of adoption placements for very young children has been achieved.

The agency learns from shortfalls, complaints, feedback from service users and research, to consistently develop and improve the service and outcomes for children. For example the advice of panel members has resulted in improved quality of reports presented to panel.

The adoption team has very positive links with the children's social workers. They will

offer advice and support to colleagues on an informal basis. Staff have undertaken 'pathway to permanency' training which has proved very positive. There are clear expectations from the agency that permanency is everybody's responsibility from the Director to the assessing and children's social workers. There are now strategic processes and systems in place to support monitoring and prevent drift thus ensuring that permanency is on the agenda appropriately and at an early stage. There is clear strategic leadership and commitment which all staff are aware of and engaged in. All these developments improve outcomes for children by preventing delay, involving them with the agency, ensuring that the social workers are knowledgeable and skilled and that families are well supported.

The disruption rate is very low. There have been no disruptions in the last four years. This is testament to good planning, matching, support and multidisciplinary working arrangements.

Stakeholders, service users and children know what they can expect from the service as written information is clear, available and readily accessible. For example, the Statement of Purpose and information for enquirers are on the local authority's website. These documents can be translated into other languages and formats as required. As well as a child-friendly children's guide, there are a number of individually-tailored resources which are used to enable children to understand what Croydon offers to them and how to access other services.

There are very effective relationships with partner agencies; for example, with health and education, all of which work closely with the social work and adoption teams. This ensures that children achieve good outcomes, as all the services work together in a coordinated way for the benefit of the child.

Staff are very committed to providing a high quality, child-focused service and they are appropriately skilled, knowledgeable, qualified and experienced. They benefit from regular supervision and appraisal and value the support they receive from their managers and the authority, which in turn benefits the people with whom they work. The appointment of consultant practitioner's within the agency has strengthened the teams and given additional support to team members.

The administrative support to the adoption team and panel is excellent and valued, as it enables the team and panel to be more efficient and effective in what they do. Records are very well ordered to enable ease of access to information and give a coherent picture of the child's life story, if they access their records in the future. These are stored in very safe and secure facilities to prevent unauthorised access or damage.

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.