

London Borough of Hillingdon Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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Inspector	Paul Clark
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Date of last inspection	18/11/2010

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Service information

Brief description of the service

The adoption service of the London Borough of Hillingdon, known as the Adoption and Permanency Team undertakes all statutory work associated with adoption. It operates from the Civic Centre in Uxbridge. The duties it undertakes are as follows: the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters; the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters; the support of adoption placements; post-adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, including birth records counselling and intermediary work.

The authority have a service level agreement with an Adoption Support Agency to support the birth parents of children placed for adoption, or who have been adopted. The authority also have a service level agreement with a Voluntary Adoption Agency to carry out the preparation, assessment and approval of inter-country adopters.

There is a Team Manager and a Deputy Team Manager who supervise a team of 7.5 social workers who undertake the assessment of prospective adopters and one social worker who undertakes adoption support work. There is one Family Support Worker who oversees the 'Letterbox' system and direct contact arrangements between birth families and children. There is also a 0.5 Play Therapist.

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**.

The adoption service of the London Borough of Hillingdon provides a good level of care for adopted children. Children are kept safe by effective systems of recruitment and vetting of staff and of adopters and the exhaustive assessment of adopters. The adoption service have employed the management of the Safeguarding Children's services to deliberate in decisions about the recommendations about the approval of adopters where this has been thought necessary and further legal advice has been taken in such instances.

Adopters are well supported by good levels of preparation, matching and on-going support systems provided by specially trained staff and this has resulted in there being no disruption of adoption placements within the past two years. The service

has introduced plans to make service development planning more inclusive for children and adopters and the senior officers of the council and the management of children's services work in collaboration to produce service improvements.

To further improve the service the time taken to find an adopter for a child who has been recognised as being in need of adoption should be reduced and the time taken to conduct the assessments of adopters should also be reduced.

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 children are placed with 12 months of the decision of the agency decision maker that they should be placed for adoption NMS 13
- ensure that the adoption panel make a considered recommendation on the suitability of a prospective adopter to adopt within eight months of receipt of the prospective adopter's formal application to be assessed. NMS 17.7

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **adequate**.

Children for whom the best outcome is to be adopted, have clearly written Child Permanency Records and adoption plans in place. These plans identify how children's needs should be met and they are drawn up in collaboration between locality and adoption team social workers and signed off by the managers of the service and the decision that these children are in need of adoption is then ratified by the Agency Decision Maker. These plans ensure that children have clear plans of action in place intended to meet their future needs.

Due to the complex needs of some children and the agency's commitment to keeping sibling groups together 31% of children for whom the plan is adoption have waited longer than 12 months to be matched with an adoptive family. If children cannot be matched with adopters locally the service will seek a match with adopters recruited by the agencies from within the West London Adoption Consortium, of whom Hillingdon are a member. If a match has not been made within 4 weeks the children's profiles will be entered on the database of the National Adoption Network. These measures help to reduce the delays in matching children with adopters.

Adoption plans identify the courts decisions with regard to the necessary contact arrangements between children and their birth families, where appropriate. A Family Support Worker, who is a member of the adoption team has recently been recruited to oversee the letterbox system. Adopters report that in the past there have been some occurrences where letters have gone missing or not appropriately checked and

the appointment of this worker has been a positive action to address this.

There are good arrangements in place to support children's health and educational progress. A designated medical officer conducts children's initial health assessments and meets with the child's proposed adopters to make adopters fully aware of the child's known health history and their future health needs and how these should be met. The medical officer also acts as the vice chair of the adoption panel. There is also a member of the adoption team who is a qualified social worker and play therapist. This offers children and adoptive parents good levels of support in attending to children's needs related to issues arising from the attachment and loss they may have experienced. The service also has access to the local child and adolescent mental health services team. There is also a children's Looked After Children (LAC) nursing service who will support children's health needs up to the time of the Adoption Order being made.

The authority have a 'virtual school' arrangement in place to support LAC and this service extends to adopted children. The service is overseen by a 'Virtual Head Teacher'.

Quality of service

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

Potential adopters value highly the initial contact arrangements that the service have put in place. This includes initial enquiries being received by a specially trained contact team who will send out early information packs about adoption. A social worker from the adoption team contacts enquirers who are then visited at home also at an early stage. Enquirers are further supported by good quality information events which are held bi-monthly.

Adopters feel well prepared for the adoption task by their attendance at preparation groups which they also attend at an early stage of their assessment. These follow the format of a national adoption association. Adopters are introduced to all aspects of adoption both positive and negative and are enabled to make an informed choice about making a commitment to adopt a child.

Prospective Adopters Reports (PAR) are completed by the social workers carrying out the assessments of potential adopters. The authority have a service level agreement with a Voluntary Adoption Agency to conduct the assessment and approval of inter-country adopters. Following staff training and more effective monitoring the PARs undertaken by the adoption team are now generally of a good quality containing both descriptive and analytic accounts of potential adopters. Social workers PARs are signed off by the manager of the service before being presented to the adoption panel for recommendation to the Agency Decision Maker. These assessments are generally timely. However, in the past 12 months, 25% of approvals have taken longer than eight months from the time of potential adopters' formal application. Thorough oversight of PARs by the adoption panel has been affected by panel errors. On one occasion, this in part, led to one potential adoptive couple not being

approved and having to wait a further two months before the error was rectified. The effectiveness of the panel function has been improved by the recent rearrangement of the panel which has included a new panel chair.

Children are supported in gaining a good knowledge of their personal history by the provision of good quality life story work conducted by social workers, foster carers and adoptive parents who are working in collaboration under the guidance of skilled life story workers. Workers take time to consult birth parents about the content of life story work and later life letters and children are provided with these within 10 days of the adoption order being made.

Social workers produce comprehensive adoption support plans which give clear guidance on children's on-going needs and how these will be met. This includes the contact arrangements in place with birth families where this is considered appropriate. Adopted adults have good access to birth records counselling and intermediary services which are conducted by an identified specialist worker within the adoption team who is trained in this area of work.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Children spoken to reported that they feel safe and happy in their adoptive families. Social workers make regular visits to them during the early stages of adoption and they are always seen alone and asked if they are happy. Children are provided with clear information materials which give them the contact details of helping agencies should they have any concerns. These can be made available in their own language or in symbol form.

Adopters are recruited, vetted and assessed to ensure that they will present no threat or danger to children. In one instance concerns about a potential adopter was the subject of lengthy investigation, legal advice and attempts to establish more factual information about the adopter's history. The deliberations of the authority's Service Manager for Safeguarding Children were taken and used to support the social worker's recommendation that the potential adopter be approved. This deliberation was ratified by the panel and the Agency Decision Maker and the adopter approved.

Staff are appropriately recruited and vetted to ensure that they present no threat or danger to children. All managers, social workers and adopters undergo a high level of safeguarding children training relevant to their status and responsibility and this training is appropriately updated. Adopters are well trained and prepared to support children who have been subject to abuse and the safeguarding children policy is relevant to the needs of adopted children. The long term impact of previous abuse experienced by adopted children is made known to adopters by the provision of a good level of preparation training and on-going adoption support. This support is provided by an identified social worker and a specialist Play Therapist within the adoption team who will give further direct therapeutic support to adopted children and families where concerns have been raised. The availability of this additional

service mitigates any delay that children might experience in waiting to be seen by local children and adolescent mental health services.

An identified adoption support worker within the team has been specially trained to provide birth records counselling and intermediary services for those adopted adults seeking information about the circumstances of their adoption and this provides a good level of support to those individuals seeking this service.

Leadership and management

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

The adoption service demonstrates a capacity for continuous development. This is achieved and implemented by collaborative monitoring and planning which takes place between the senior management group of children's services, the corporate parenting group of the council, and the local safeguarding children's board. Service development reviews are conducted within appropriate frequencies and plans implemented.

There is a clear and comprehensive statement of purpose and children's guide in place. These are appropriately reviewed. All documents relating to the adoption service will be made available in appropriate languages upon request, or if need is identified.

Although the numbers of children placed for adoption within the past 12 months has been slightly lower than its statistical neighbours, the service has conducted poster and recruitment campaigns aimed at providing adopters for those children who are more difficult to find adopters for. This has resulted in an increase in the numbers of potential adopters currently being assessed and this is a result of the planned and positive action taken.

The good recruitment and preparation of adopters, and early identification of children who need to be adopted being suitably matched, has resulted in there being no disruptions of adoption placements in the past two years and this provides children with stability and improves their prospects for the future.

The service is a member of the West London Adoption Consortium which gives children greater options in being suitably matched.

All social work staff are appropriately qualified and registered with the Health and Care Professions Council and the majority have a higher professional qualification. All managers and staff undertake an annual personal development profile which identifies their on-going training and development needs and have good access to training resources. Staff supervision and team meetings are undertaken at least within the required frequencies. These good levels of management, training and supervision ensure that adopted children and adopters will receive high levels of professional support.

All of the recommendations arising from the previous inspection have been fully implemented.

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 the inspection of local authority adoption agencies.