

London Borough of Lewisham Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Margaret Lynes / Tola Akinde-Hummel
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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

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

Service information

Brief description of the service

The Authority provides a comprehensive adoption service which includes: placing children in need of adoptive families; recruiting, preparing, and assessing adoptive families; providing assessments for post adoption support to adoptive children and families; counselling and support to birth parents and families; and assistance and counselling to adopted adults who wish to see their birth records. Intermediary services for adopted adults and birth family members, and contact arrangements for children, both indirect and direct are also provided. The adoption team also takes on case responsibility for the children from the time the care order is obtained, and deals with inter country adoptions.

The Authority is a member of the South East London Adoption Consortium, and works closely with other authorities to effect suitable placements for children. Interagency placements have been used on a regular basis to prevent delay for children needing adoptive families. It has established partnerships with other services to provide consultancy and support services.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This is a good service with some outstanding features. Action has been taken to meet the majority of the recommendations that arose following the last inspection of this service. Positive comments were received from adopters and birth relatives regarding the quality of the service they received. This report contains six recommendations. These in the main relate to recording, and the need for staff to ensure that all reports are appropriately signed; that all photographs are identified and dated; that files contain evidence that appropriate Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks have been carried out; that the service can evidence how it is prioritising recruitment from black and minority ethnic communities and that the service can evidence that regular file audits are carried out. One recommendation relates to the panel, and the need for the service to ensure that there are no conflicts of interest.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last inspection report contained seven recommendations. These related to the need for: the statement of purpose to be formally approved by the Cabinet following a review; to ensure the service had obtained full work histories for the adopters; to ensure that panel deliberations considered all aspects of the child's needs, and not just focus on medical concerns; to monitor the level of business support; to reorganise staff files so that they are easier to navigate; to ensure that all

photographs are identified and dated; and to provide a clearer analysis of need and current provision so as to have a more robust recruitment strategy. Action has been taken with regard to the first five of these recommendations. Further work is needed to ensure that the latter two are also actioned.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The adoption service has a written recruitment plan for adopters, which prioritises encouraging applicants from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. Whilst this has proved difficult to achieve, and the priority remains, the service has, nevertheless, been successful in matching particularly young children with adopters who can best meet their assessed needs. Older children are not overlooked. The adoption team manager attends fortnightly permanence planning meetings which enables adoption staff to be aware of the likelihood of children being considered for adoption. The adoption team will consider all types of families to support the children placed for adoption. The Authority has a good record on same sex and single adopters although the vast majority are still couples. Where possible, the views of the child are taken into account. The format used to ascertain these views is not adoption specific. The independent reviewing officers stated that they would give consideration to drafting an adoption specific template.

An efficient preparation, assessment and approval process is in place. Applications to become adopters are taken before attendance on a preparation course, in line with the Regulations. Where applicants have been counselled out, the reasons for this were clearly outlined on the files. A fourth day has been added to the course, specifically aimed at adopters who have been approved but not yet had a placement made. This day considers potential attachment difficulties and contact arrangements. Adopters commented that they had found the whole preparation course to be informative and very useful. They felt the service was clear and honest about the type of child who may be placed for adoption.

Applicants said that they found the assessment process to be thorough, intrusive and demanding, but also that the adoption staff tried to make it as sensitive and smooth as possible. They did not experience any delays and were kept informed throughout the process. Records indicate that in almost all cases the service is completing the assessment process within the recommended eight month timeframe.

Safeguarding checks are made of prospective adopters, including family members and references are taken up. It was not possible to evidence on all of the files examined confirmation that all appropriate CRB checks had been undertaken, albeit

verbal confirmation was provided during the inspection.

Adoptive parents are provided with clear information on the matching process, and are provided with a leaflet entitled 'Considering a match?' which sets out all the information that parents will receive. Where appropriate they are referred to the Adoption Register. Before a match is agreed, adopters confirmed they are given accurate and full written information to help them understand the needs and background of the child, and stated that they did not feel pressurised into accepting a match they were not entirely comfortable with.

The service has a well organised, properly constituted adoption panel which reflects the diversity of the local population. The panel has experienced members and is effectively chaired by an independent person. In the panel observed, inspectors felt that there was a possible conflict of interest between the panel advisor and the case being presented, as the aforementioned was also the supervisor of the presenting social worker. Assurances were given by the service manager that it was normal process to ensure that this potential conflict was avoided by rotating panel advisors. Examination of recruitment files indicated that all panel members had signed a confidentiality agreement, and all appropriate checks had been carried out. There was just one exception to this, and the member concerned was not being used until one check had been updated. Policies and procedures are in place and regularly reviewed. Members of the panel receive regular training, including on inter-country adoption, and also undergo joint training with the adoption team. All decisions are relayed in writing to the attendees within timescales, and copies of these letters were seen on the files inspected.

Recommendation reports are provided for the agency decision maker. These reports summarised the reasons for the recommendation with the notable exception of commenting on the appropriateness of the ethnic and cultural match. This important issue is clearly debated at panel, as is reflected in the minutes, but is not commented on in the aforementioned report. Feedback from those attending the panel is very positive.

The recruitment files for the service manager and a number of other staff were examined. These contained the required information with two exceptions where it could not be confirmed that the CRB's that had been ported over had been appropriately checked.

There is a comprehensive set of safeguarding policies and procedures in place. These are understood and implemented by the adoption service. A whistle blowing policy is available on the intranet. New staff have child protection training as part of their induction. Other staff are expected to keep up-to-date with relevant new publications and attend periodical updates.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Adoptive parents are enabled to provide stable and permanent homes for the children that are placed with them. The adoption team becomes involved in the placement process very early on, which allows them to gain a greater insight into the individual needs of the children, and also allows them to put support services into place.

The adoption support service has a senior social worker co-located with the child and adolescent mental health service which supports children and young people with life story work and provides therapeutic input. This is a valued link. Every child placed for adoption is allocated a support worker, irrespective of their current need for a support service.

A number of support groups are provided, including those for adopted adults, adopted teenagers and birth mothers. Good use is made of the consortium in this regard. There are no waiting lists for support services. The adopters met with during the inspection commented that although they were not using support services at the time, they were confident that should they need to access it this process would be facilitated by the support team. There are good examples of work undertaken by the team, including support group workshops, financial support, support plans, and therapeutic services for children or adults. Assessments clearly set out the presenting issues, how support will be provided and by whom.

The Authority considers that its adoption service is user focused, and that this is a key strength of the service. It was able to evidence that it is responsive to the needs of service users, for example by setting up further workshops for adoptive parents at their request. There is effective feedback in place to ensure that the service is constantly improving and meeting the needs of service users. This feedback includes seeking the views of children and young people.

The staff welcome all enquirers without prejudice and ensure that they are given clear information on the services provided by the agency. This includes referring enquirers on to alternative agencies if it is felt that this service cannot meet their needs. Service users are advised of their right to make representations and complaints. Where these have been made they have been appropriately logged and responded to.

A number of Ofsted questionnaires were returned. The vast majority of these were positive. Comments included "(this Authority) provided a first rate service"; "the adoption service is managed by professional and dedicated staff who try their very best to deliver services that will improve the lives of their service users"; "I could not have had so much help, it was superb"; "my social workers are all very professional and show outstanding help towards not only the child but ourselves"; "I am so glad I chose (this Authority) to approve me as I have enjoyed the process and feel that they understand me and I trust thoroughly they will match me with a very suitable

child". A minority of the responses were less positive. One respondent felt that there needed to be more emotional support offered to families, whilst another felt that they could have been better informed as to what was happening. One respondent, whilst very positive about the adoption service, commented that having 13 - 14 people at a panel was too much, and consideration should be given to reducing this number.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

From observation and discussion it was evident that the staff in the adoption team make every effort to engage birth parents; to ascertain their wishes in terms of matching; and to involve them in farewell visits and a one off meeting with the adopters.

Efforts are made to obtain for the child appropriate information from the birth parents about themselves and life before the adoption. Staff in the adoption team take on the responsibility of both later life letters and life story book work. Letterbox contact is well managed.

A very helpful, clearly written letter is sent out to birth parents informing them that a decision has been made for their child to be adopted. They are also sent an informative guide which outlines the steps that will now be taken, both if the birth parents agree to the adoption and if they do not. It includes information on contact, and what happens when their child grows up. It also provides a list of useful help and advisory groups.

Several birth relatives kindly gave up their time to meet and speak with inspectors. They were very complimentary about the service they received.

The Authority has written policies and procedures for the support services it provides. Prospective service users are made aware that they may be entitled to request an assessment of their needs. The decision whether or not to provide a service is based upon that assessment.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. An equalities impact assessment has been carried out for the adoption service and an action plan is in place. The service

prioritises applications from adopters from diverse backgrounds. This is so that a child can be found an adoptive family who can reflect and promote their cultural heritage. It was difficult to evidence how this prioritising actually worked in practice. The panel is reflective of a diverse community, as is part of the adoption team. Where there is not this diversity, the service endeavours to seek additional input from external agencies so as to ensure that it promotes individual needs in respect of race, gender and cultural identity.

The statement of purpose contains all of the information required in the Regulations. There is a good children's guide, written in a language that is clear and understandable. It includes the contact details for the Children's Rights Director, Ofsted, the young people's complaints team, and the adoption service. It also advertises that it can be accessed in other languages and formats including large print, Braille, audiotape and compact disc.

Clear information is provided for would-be adopters through a number of leaflets. These include a Guide to the adoption process; Attending the adoption and permanence panel; Information for parents about adoption (for birth parents); Current recruitment priorities for the service for prospective adopters and Requirements for adoption. They are honest about the type of children who are placed for adoption and the type of adopters needed. Prompt responses are given to enquiries, and even if the enquirers are not what the service is seeking staff will still find time to talk with them and possibly point them in a more relevant direction.

The adoption service is organised and managed effectively. There are clear roles for managers and well established lines of communication. Staff commented that they feel that they are well managed and receive regular supervision and appraisals. Team managers also spoke positively with regard to their line management.

The service monitors its performance in a number of ways, including the preparation of bi annual reports for Cabinet; regular senior management team meetings; feedback from service users; input from independent reviewing officers; and regular audits conducted by both adoption team managers and the service manager. The Lead Member, who holds the portfolio for children and young people, said they felt confident that the service was performing well against its targets.

There is an adequate number of staff with appropriate experience and qualifications. The number of staff with a post qualifying award is in excess of the 20% stated in the national minimum standards. The team is stable, and the need for agency staff rarely arises.

Staff have access to an in-house training programme although the courses offered are not always relevant to adoption. They can access external courses, funding and time permitting. It is commendable that some staff covered their own costs to undergo play therapy training, and this indicates a considerable commitment to the adoption service. Adoption support staff have had training in access to records and intermediary work.

Case records for children and young people are securely kept in lockable filing cabinets in the team's office. It could not be confirmed that these cabinets would protect the contents from either fire or water, however assurances were given by the service manager that more appropriate cabinets would be provided once a forthcoming move to another part of the premises has been completed. Team managers stated that regular file audits were carried out, however this was not evidenced in the files examined. A number of photographs were found to be unsigned and unidentified, and a number of reports were unsigned. Archived files are stored in a nearby building. Access to these is restricted. Files are stored in metal rail cabinets. Inspectors were advised that these are water and fire resistant.

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 adopters and staff files contain satisfactory evidence that appropriate CRB checks have been carried out (NMS 5, 19)
- ensure panel advisors are rotated as necessary so as to prevent any potential conflict of interest (NMS 10)
- evidence how the service is prioritising recruitment of adopters from black and minority ethnic communities (NMS 2)
- ensure that all photographs in children's and adopters files are dated and the people in them are named (NMS 25)
- ensure that all reports, pertaining both to children and adopters, are signed by all essential persons (NMS 25)
- evidence that adoption files are regularly audited (NMS 25)