

London Borough of Hillingdon Adoption Service

Inspection report for la adoption agency

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Inspector	Rossella Volpi / Sean White
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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 outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

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 adoption agency of the London Borough of Hillingdon undertakes all statutory work associated with adoption services. It operates from the Civic Centre in Uxbridge. The duties it undertakes are as follows: the recruitment; preparation assessment and approval of adopters, both domestic and inter-country; 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; support to birth parents of children placed for adoption, or who have been adopted.

Summary

This was an announced inspection conducted by two inspectors, mostly over the course of one week. All key standards were considered in assessing the outcome areas.

This is an enabling authority, with staff feeling free to operate with innovation and use their skills expansively. Equality and diversity are well embedded in all aspects of the operation.

Children benefit from well-considered matches with adopters carefully assessed to meet their needs. Adopters report that the assessments are conducted in a sensitive and respectful way.

The adoption panel is robust, child focused, diligent and acts as a good monitoring tool.

Adoption support to adopters is very good, although it is operating at full capacity. The uptake of support by birthparents has increased, but there is no information for birth parents on how to access counselling in languages other than English.

The adoption team is excellently led and demonstrates a clear and deep understanding of adoption matters.

There are significant pressures on the adoption team at present, because of social work and management vacancies. The quality of letterbox contact had declined recently, although steps have now been taken to address the shortfalls, which are starting to prove effective.

The safeguarding procedures do not cover historical abuse and the way recruitment files are kept does not clearly evidence a thorough vetting procedure in all cases.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

The previous inspection report, of July 2007, details 17 recommendations or actions to be addressed by the adoption service.

Overall there is evidence that the service has taken all points seriously and devoted effort and resources to improve the service consistently with the issues raised at the previous inspection.

The service has completed a review of panel membership and terms and conditions for independent panel members during 2008. This continued to improve panel processes and

procedures throughout 2009; this included strengthening controls and quality assurance to ensure the operation of the panel is effective. With a consortium of 10 other adoption agencies, they have identified training needs and put in place an ongoing training programme for panel members. The consortium has introduced a quarterly panel advisors' forum to share best practice and research and to learn from each other.

The Statement of Purpose is approved formally and it has been amended to include all information, as required by regulation. There has been regular liaison with the children with disabilities service to explore ways of communicating with non-verbal and pre verbal children. This has led to the planning and construction of a 'Transitions Box' for workers to interact with young and non-verbal children.

Systems have been established to evaluate the effectiveness of the adopters' recruitment strategy, for quality assuring reports and making assessments more robust. The executive side of the council received two written reports a year regarding the work done by the adoption service.

The intermediary support work, including birth records counselling, is carried out only by qualified social workers and there are clear processes for the assessment and monitoring of work in respect to members of the public who have been touched by adoption, such as adult adoptees.

When birth parents do not wish to express a view about the planning for their child, this is recorded

Children social workers have access to the tools they need to complete life story books, although timeliness remains an issue.

The contents of case files for adopters and children are up to date and regularly audited. There is a dedicated part-time post providing administrative support to the team and administrative procedures have been updated. The archiving arrangements have been reviewed and are now managed by a company contracted to meet all of Hillingdon archiving needs.

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.

Overall, children benefit from a service which endeavours to match them with adopters who best meet their assessed needs and reflect their ethnic origin. Adopters are provided with full information about the children they are considering and the agency reviews thoroughly how to support adopters to meet any needs they do not feel fully prepared for. Adopters think highly of the agency approach to matching and said, for example: 'The matching process and the introductions were very good, well organised and thought out'. 'The whole team has been amazing, fantastic'. 'The medical advisor was very helpful to talk about what the report really means; she gave practical and creative suggestions to address the issues. Very thorough'.

Equality and diversity issues are actively addressed and evidenced in the assessment and matching process and carefully reviewed at panel stage.

Disruptions have been uncommon. From those that have happened, although it is difficult to judge whether those matches were unwise, it is evident that learning lessons have been carefully considered and acted upon.

There is a clear policy in use to guide staff on safeguarding, which includes the management of and reporting plan for child protection issues and all social workers receive regular training on safeguarding. The policy omits reference to historical abuse; administrative staff have not received child protection training, although there are plans to do so imminently.

Prospective adopters are welcomed without prejudice. They are involved in a formal, thorough and comprehensive assessment, preparation and approval process and there is analytical evidence about the prospective adopters' parenting capacity.

Adopters report that the assessments are conducted in a sensitive and respectful way and are, mostly, very satisfied with the service received. For example, they commented: 'We could really be open and honest, we understood the reason for the questions'. 'Hillingdon is brilliant'. 'We could always speak to somebody we knew as we met all social workers and team manager'. 'What is great about the department is a real sense of caring and good communications from all involved'.

Adopters also said that the assessing social worker was exemplary in her approach, supportive, diligent and professional. They said that the assessing social worker understood their circumstances well and was able to comprehend their situation in respect of their sexuality and the context of this in the adoption process. Feedback on the preparation groups has been more variable, being regarded as extremely well managed and conducted by some adopters, but satisfactory by others.

The quality of the reports had been variable; but has been improving and has been generally good for the last year; thus demonstrating that the improvements are now embedded in practice.

The application from adopters is often taken after preparation has started. This is both contrary to good practice guidelines and to the authority's own expectations. The practice impinges on the right of adopters to make representations, should they be considered unsuitable or encouraged to withdraw during the preparation course. Furthermore, it distorts the timescales for assessments in that commencement of assessment is taken from when the application is received.

There are clear recruitment criteria for adopters which prioritise families who can meet the needs of the children coming up for adoption; they include large siblings groups, older children, children with special needs and children from specific racial or religious backgrounds. The recruitment strategy, which is reviewed every three months, has been effective in increasing the number of placements and has recently exceeded the target the authority had set for the number of adopters to be recruited. The agency has been successful in placing most sibling groups together, including groups of three where it was assessed that the children should stay together. However, despite a number of recruitment drives, most adopters are still recruited by word of mouth and this has not been effective in targeting the families from the specific racial or religious backgrounds of some of the children placed for adoption. Managers are aware of this and are considering how to address it. Furthermore, when finding a match for children

of specific ethnic or cultural backgrounds, timescales are set and reviewed in the light of finding potential matches, to ensure that the plans for the children do not drift.

The adoption panel is robust and steps have been taken to make it more reflective of the community it serves. The panel is child focused, diligent and acts as a good monitoring tool. It helps to ensure that decisions about children and their placements are safe and standards continue to improve. There is good emphasis on culture and race and commitment to promotion of equality. There is an experienced and very well regarded chair, referred to as an asset by colleagues and social workers. There are excellent advisors and committed panel members. The potential conflict of roles, arising from the panel advisor being the adoption team manager, is usually well managed.

The agency's decisions are made without delay and appropriately. The function is with an assistant director post. Therefore, it is at a senior enough level to enable objectivity and authority to take action in response to issues arising. Decisions are formally conveyed in writing to adopters and birth parents.

The wording in some documentation does not reflect that the agency is making the decision, rather than ratifying or endorsing the panel's recommendations, and the decisions do not always give the reasons. This is being reviewed and addressed. The practice that panel minutes are not available at the time the decision is made is also being changed.

The agency has a thorough recruitment and vetting procedure for staff and panel members, consistent with the expectations of the national minimum standards. However, recruitment files do not always evidence such good practice guidelines.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The adoption agency provides excellent support for adoptive families and a very good service to adopted adults wanting birth record counselling or tracing.

The services available are flexible; as well as internal support from the adoption team, there is a service level agreement with an external agency and spot purchase from other agencies. The agency has access to specialist advisers, as appropriate, as also discussed above under safeguarding, in relation to legal and medical advice. Families are offered formal training and support groups. There are also fun days organised that are well received and which have been referred to as 'terrific fun' by families.

Overall adopters are well prepared to take on the task of parenting a child from the care system and very well informed about the needs and potential health issues about the child to be placed. Children are also well prepared to join their new family. Users expressed satisfaction with the service received with effusive comments about the support provided by both their social worker and the play therapist. For example, it was commented that the placement would have ended without the very skilled and approachable manner with which the agency identified the needs of the child and put in place suitable support; as a consequence the outcome of the placement now is much more optimistic. The adoption support social worker was referred to as 'excellent' and users made comments, such as: 'She is invaluable, calming, assuring, gave me a lot of information, support'. 'I benefited a lot from her support and as source of information'.

The in-house service, post adoption, is provided mainly by one social worker and a part-time therapist. The potential for growth and improvement is, therefore, limited, considering that adoption support is a growing area of need and the demand likely to expand. Furthermore, support from children mental health services has been very limited.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Hillingdon strives to maintain children's heritage, help them make sense of their situation and to support birth parents. Hillingdon takes a proactive approach to endeavour to engage birth families, counsel them before and after adoption and involve them in adoption plans.

All professional involved recognise the lifelong implications of adoption and make professional assessments to tailor services based on individual needs.

Engagement of birth families has increased with a service level agreement with a specialist organisation which offers support at local venues, as well as a range of support at premises in central London. However, there are no leaflets or information about accessing counselling in languages other than English and children's social workers report that this has been an issue at times. Furthermore, the present waiting list of about two months to access counselling at local venues has the potential to discourage those birth parents who are going through the adoption process and for whom such timescale is too long.

Direct contact and letter box contact are clearly set out and normally sensitively and well supported. However, there has been a recent significant deterioration in the way contact arrangements have been managed that caused distress and discontent. This has been responded to and addressed and the agency is expecting letter box arrangements to now resume at the standards that had been previously maintained.

Children permanency reports are subject to careful scrutiny at managerial and panel level, backed by support and training of the social workers completing them, in recognition of their importance both for matching and for maintaining heritage. Consequently, their quality is improving. There are examples of good life story work, although some are not timely, but the adoption team is working with the children social workers to address this.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

This authority demonstrates a strong commitment to meeting the needs of all children waiting for adoption and to safeguard its service users. It is a child-focused agency, able to critically appraise its practices, open in identifying its strengths and shortfalls, and responsive to the findings of reviews. There has been sustained progress in improving those areas identified as less strong at the last inspection and, therefore, in better promoting the welfare of those affected by adoption.

Elected members demonstrate commitment and drive to ensure children have the best possible futures. Adoption and children's social workers work well in partnership; the best interests of

the child being the focus of all their activities. Clearly social workers operate to outcomes, although it is evident that the processes and protocols in place work effectively and generally enable the expected results to be achieved.

The adoption team is excellently led and demonstrates a clear and deep understanding of adoption matters, including current thinking and underpinning legislation. Children's social workers demonstrate commitment to adoption and report that the expertise and partnership working with adoption workers is invaluable in the process of placing children for adoption and matching them with the most appropriate families.

There are significant pressures on the adoption team at present, because of social work and management vacancies, although the authority has partly mitigated these with the appointment of an interim service manager and a deputy adoption team manager. There have been some difficulties in retaining children social workers and the turnover has impacted on the adoption team. For example, in relation to the training and support they give on adoption matters and because some children, whose plan is adoption, have experienced a frequent change of social workers. However, the authority's strategy now is to recruit to all vacancies in children's services with permanent positions, which the authority expects to bring more stability and a better use of resources.

Case files are well organised with information easy to find. They lend themselves well to managerial auditing and, therefore, reduce the risk of important information being overlooked.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. This is discussed in the body of the report under the specific outcome areas. For example, equality and diversity are integral to all aspects of the service and there is a strong awareness to address those aspects where practices have not been fully effective, such as, the recruitment of adopters from specific groups or provision of support to birth parents in languages other than English. The agency welcomes all members of the community without prejudice and staff are committed to anti-discriminatory practice in all areas of service provision. The agency has matched children to adopters regardless of age and sexuality and tailors support packages to ensure that families are treated fairly according to their needs.

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):

- invite applications from prospective adopters before they undertake preparation training (NMS 4).
- review the terminology used on documentation to clearly demonstrate that the agency is making a decision, rather than ratifying panel's recommendations and record the reason for the decision (NMS 13).
- ensure that there is clear evidence that all staff are fit to work for the purposes of an adoption service (NMS 19).
- review safeguarding procedures to ensure that they include historical abuse allegations (NMS 32).

- consider providing information for birth parents on how to access counselling in languages other than English (NMS 9).