Commission for Social Care Inspection

Making Social Care Better for People

inspection report

ADOPTION SERVICE

The London Borough of Barking & Dagenham

512a Heathway
Dagenham
Essex
RM10 7SL

Lead Inspector
Marian
Denny

Announced
16th August 2005 9:30am

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

- Put the people who use social care first
- Improve services and stamp out bad practice
- Be an expert voice on social care
- Practise what we preach in our own organisation

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This is a report of an inspection to assess whether services are meeting the needs of people who use them. The legal basis for conducting inspections is the Care Standards Act 2000 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for this establishment are those for *Adoption.* They can be found at www.dh.gov.uk or obtained from The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

Every Child Matters, outlined the government's vision for children's services and formed the basis of the Children Act 2004. It provides a framework for inspection so that children's services should be judged on their contribution to the outcomes considered essential to wellbeing in childhood and later life. Those outcomes are:

- Being healthy
- Staying safe
- Enjoying and achieving
- Making a contribution; and
- Achieving economic wellbeing.

In response, the Commission for Social Care Inspection has re-ordered the national minimum standards for children's services under the five outcomes, for reporting purposes. A further section has been created under 'Management' to cover those issues that will potentially impact on all the outcomes above.

Copies of *Every Child Matters* and *The Children Act 2004* are available from The Stationery Office as above.

SERVICE INFORMATION

Name of service	The London Borough of Barking & Dagenham Adoption Service
Address	512a Heathway, Dagenham, Essex, RM10 7SL
Telephone number	0208 227 2233
Fax number	0208 227 5998
Email address	nigel.fordham@lbbd
Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)	London Borough of Barking & Dagenham
Name of registered manager (if applicable)	Nigel Fordham
Type of registration	LAA
No. of places registered (if applicable)	N/A
Category(ies) of registration, with number of places	N/A

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:
None

Date of last inspection This was the first inspection by the CSCI

Brief Description of the Service:
The London Borough of Barking and Dagenham operates its own adoption service, which is located within the authority's children's services. The adoption team's office premises are situated on Heathway in Dagenham and easily accessible by both car and public transport. A comprehensive adoption service is provided to children and adults,which includes placing children in need of adoptive families, recruiting, preparing, assessing and approving adopters for both domestic and inter country adoptions. An adoption service is also provided to step-parents and relatives who adopt. A variety of post adoption support services is provided to adoptive families and children, as well as a counselling and support service to birth parents and their families. The agency, if required, will also provide assistance to facilitate direct and indirect contact arrangements with birth parents, their families and adoptive parents. In addition a counselling service is provided to adopted adults who wish to see their birth records or to contact their birth relatives. The agency also employs a specialist worker, who is able, where necessary, to carry out attachment and direct work with children placed for adoption

SUMMARY

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

The adoption service demonstrated a real commitment to this inspection and had prepared well for it. All the pre-inspection documentation provided was thorough and arrived within the agreed timescales. The arrangements made for the inspection were thoughtful, all those involved in the inspection were extremely helpful and this enabled inspectors to make effective use of their time, which was much appreciated.

Prior to the inspection, the pre-inspection material and the questionnaires, which had been returned to the inspection team were read and analysed. The information obtained from these documents has been incorporated into the inspection findings.

The inspection, itself, was carried out over three days and involved two inspectors. In addition, one inspector observed the adoption panel for half a day. Interviews were undertaken with the interim Director of Social Services, senior personnel, team managers, front-line and administrative staff. An elected member, who had lead responsibility for children services, was also interviewed, as well as the adoption panel's medical, legal advisor and chairperson. A sample of children and adopters' files were read and four adoptive families were visited. A variety of agency records were inspected and administrative and resources examined, which included premises, record keeping and security. In addition questionnaires were received from three adopters.

What the service does well:

The London Borough of Barking and Dagenham was committed to providing "the best service" for looked after children and had made a real investment in the service to achieve this. The authority's senior management team shared these aspirations and were working hard to realise them. The head of the children's services recognised the improvements that were required in the service and had a clear vision about its future development. This information was effectively communicated to staff through regular surgeries and quarterly staff briefings. These meetings were greatly valued by staff, who stated that the head of service respected them and carefully listened to their views, which resulted in good communication between them. They were clear about the vision for children's services and had confidence in his leadership skills. The adoption agency's management team had the experience and skills to manage and organise the service in an effective and efficient manner.

The separation of adoption and fostering into two distinct teams had enabled the adoption service to focus more clearly on the core business and prioritise the work appropriately. The adoption service was an integral part of the children services and there was good communication between the childcare

and adoption staff. The effective communication between them facilitated a child-focused approach to adoption issues.

The agency had developed a robust tracking system, which ensured all children needing adoption were closely monitored and their care plan realised in an effective and timely manner. This system was further strengthened with the appointment of a dedicated, independent reviewing officer, who chaired the reviews of children requiring adoption and this ensured consistency of practice.

Adopters indicated that the agency's preparation training was of "excellent quality" and had been extremely useful in "exploring adoption issues". Adopters were generally positive about the assessment indicating that it had been "thorough, as well as being handled in a "sensitive and skilful manner".

The creation of the post adoption support co-ordinator post had enabled the agency to develop post adoption support arrangements and to oversee compliance with the Adoption & Children Act 2002.

The agency had also recognised the need to address children's attachment issues to ensure the stability of long-term placements and had appointed a specialist worker within the adoption team to carry out attachment and direct work with children. There were also plans to extend this service through the appointment of an additional part-time member of staff.

The adoption panel was properly constituted and demonstrated a good knowledge and understanding of the complexity of adoption work. The panel was well chaired and the administrative support provided was of a high standard. Decision-making was thorough and timely.

A multi-agency children's services strategy group had been established to plan, develop and integrate the children's services within the borough, which had resulted in the development of a children's strategy for the borough. An inter-agency, multi-disciplinary children's services known as the Looked After Children's Health and Education Services (LACHES) had been developed, which had really impacted on the council's performance in relation to the health and education of looked after children. At the time of the inspection, consideration was being given to this service being extended and where appropriate, provided to adopted children and their families.

The children services had recently introduced family group conferencing, which demonstrated the value and importance the authority ascribed to birth parents and families in the resolution of their difficulties. These conferences also provided families a real opportunity to actively engage and involve themselves in the care planning process for their child, at an early age. The inclusion of birth parents and their families in the adoption process was clearly reflected in the agency' s policies and procedures, their use of advocacy services and the independent counselling service, which they had commissioned from Barnardo's.

Both the managers and staff had substantial knowledge and skills in the field of family placement and adoption. Whilst the managers of the agency had only recently been appointed to these posts, they had carried out these roles, on an interim basis, for some months and had already begun to work as a team. Both managers were clearly respected by the staff, whom they considered managed the agency efficiently and effectively.

What has improved since the last inspection?

This was the first inspection of the agency under the current legislation.

What they could do better:

Both the statement of purpose and the children's guide needed to be revised if they were to fully meet the national minimum standards for adoption.

The agency should develop a clearer and more focussed recruitment strategy, which should address the needs of children from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Whilst the agency had developed various written information for adopters, this information required developing, for example the information regarding the agency's support services. The agency must also ensure that all foster carers, who apply to adopt, receive the same information as other adopters.

Adopters found the preparation groups extremely valuable. Their effectiveness though could be further enhanced with the provision of a preparation group for those adopting a child for a second time and relative adopters.

Adopters' assessments were found to be of variable quality, this could be addressed with the development of more robust quality assurance, monitoring and recording systems.

Adopters presented a varied picture about the quality of support and the services provided by the agency, with some adopters stating they were "excellent", "good", "very supportive" to "need improving" and "poor". The agency should develop a coherent and comprehensive strategy of support. The inspectors were aware that the agency had plans to develop support services through collaborative work and partnership with other agencies and would endorse this action.

At the time of this inspection, the adoption team manager also undertook the role of panel adviser such a dual role may give rise to a potential conflict of interests. The agency should therefore give consideration to the separation of these roles.

The agency's child protection procedures need to include specific references to children placed for adoption and consideration given to providing staff with up-dated child protection training.

The procedures for the recruitment and selection of staff must be more robust. Personnel files and panel members' files were not kept in accordance with the adoption regulations and this must be immediately addressed.

The agency had sufficient number of staff, who were suitably qualified and experienced to meet the needs of the agency. However, the increased demands likely to be made on the service in the future would indicate a need to review the current allocation of resources to this service.

A greater emphasis needs to be placed on the development, management and monitoring of the adoption records, particularly in relation to the content and organisation of the adoption records, as an adoptive child reading the files in later life would not have access to all the information required. In addition, some of the files were not maintained in accordance with the agency's policies, procedures and current legislation and regulations.

The adoption services records were held securely however, the agency should risk assess the premises where these records are stored to ensure they are stored in a manner to minimise the risk of damage from fire or water.

There was a disaster recovery plan for the agency, however this required developing. There was evidence that the agency's adoption records were not effectively safeguarded through an appropriate back up system and some attention should be given to this.

Please contact the provider for advice of actions taken in response to this inspection.

The report of this inspection is available from enquiries@csci.gsi.gov.uk or by contacting your local CSCI office.

DETAILS OF INSPECTOR FINDINGS

CONTENTS

Staying Safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- The agency matches children with adopters (NMS 2)
- The agency assesses and prepares adopters (NMS 4)
- Adoptors are given information about matching (NMS 5)
- The functions of the adoption panel are as specified (NMS 10)
- The constitution and membership of adoption panels are as specified (NMS 11)
- Adoption panels are timely (NMS 12)
- Adoption agency decision is made without delay and appropriately (NMS 13)
- The manager is suitable to carry on or manage an adoption agency (NMS 15)
- Staff are suitable to work with children (NMS 19)
- The agency has a robust complaints procedure (NMS 24 Voluntary Adoption Agency only)

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for standard(s) 2,4,5,10,11,12,13,15,and 19.

The agency had provided successful placements for children. However, more robust quality assurance, monitoring and recording systems were required to ensure children were kept safe.

EVIDENCE:

The adoption service was clearly aware of children locally requiring adoptive families and had systems in place to prioritise prospective adopters who were likely to meet their needs. Their robust and efficient tracking systems ensured children who had an adoption plan, were not allowed to drift in the looked after system and a number of adopters had been "fast tracked" through the system to ensure timeliness in planning for specific children.

In the twelve months preceding the inspection, the adoption service had placed twenty-two children for adoption; fifteen of these children were placed with the service's own adopters and there had been one placement disruption. Whilst the service had been successful in the placement of over two-thirds of their children with their own adoptive families this placement activity can only be sustained through continuous effective recruitment of adopters. Interviews with managers clearly indicated they had a number of ideas for the future recruitment of adopters; to assist with this, the service needs to develop a

more focused recruitment strategy. Examination of the service's recent recruitment activities indicated that the agency had recruited some adopters from ethnic minority backgrounds, however a more proactive and creative approach is required, if such recruitment is to be more successful.

The adoption service's response to initial enquiries was described as being, "friendly", "positive", "encouraging", "very prompt" and "efficient". Several adopters stated that the information packs had been sent out " immediately" and that this had then been "very quickly followed by a telephone call and interview". They indicated that it was this, "prompt and positive response", which had led them to pursue an adoption application with this agency.

A formal preparation, assessment and approval process was carried out in respect of adopters. However, whilst there was a clear commitment that foster carers, who adopt a child they have previously fostered, receive the same services as other prospective adopters, this was not being totally reflected in practice and should be addressed.

The service 's preparation programme was clear, well structured and routinely evaluated, with changes implemented, where necessary. Adopters' attendance and involvement in the preparation groups was recorded in the form F presented to panel. Adopters spoken with, together with information obtained from returned questionnaires, indicated that the preparation programme was well organised and presented, with the materials used being of "excellent quality". The venue used was spoken of in a favourable manner, though one adoptive family stated the preparation groups could have been held at more convenient times. Several adopters indicated that the programme had enabled them to explore a variety of adoption issues, which had been "thought provoking", "extremely valuable" and overall viewed the preparation programme as "brilliant". In one of the returned questionnaires adopters expressed some disappointment regarding the length of time that they had waited to attend the preparation groups. Another adoptive family, who were adopting a second child, stated that the preparation group would have been more effective, if it had been specifically designed to meet their needs, as second time adopters.

Adopters were generally of the view that the assessment process had been "clear", "well structured" and "had been taken at an speed appropriate to them". They also stated that the assessment had been "rigorous", "thorough" and "personal issues" had been dealt with in a "sensitive" and "skilled" manner. Several adopters indicated that they had not been kept fully informed of their progress during the assessment, whilst others stated this was the case after approval and prior to matching. A number of adopters commented on the accuracy of the agency' recording, particularly in relation to the form F, which they stated portrayed them very accurately. The adopters spoken with had received a copy of their written assessment and were aware that they had to send any observations regarding the assessment, in writing to the agency

within twenty-eight days of receiving the notice. However, in several of the files examined, the inspectors were unable to find evidence of the 28-day waiver notice relating to the adopters' form F. This matter must now be addressed by the agency.

Adopters' assessments were found to be of variable quality, for while some were of a high standard in so far as they were detailed, insightful and showed a great deal of analysis; others were less detailed, had varying levels of analysis and did not appear to have addressed all the issues. This was clearly illustrated in one file where one of the applicants' had previously been married. This fact was quite clearly recorded in the assessment form though there was no further information or analysis regarding this in the file documentation. In another file there was no evidence that the adopter's older children had been interviewed separately from the adopter and their views regarding the adoption had been independently obtained. In a third file, the applicants had fostered for another authority however, there was no evidence to indicate though that their previous social services file had been examined and the information incorporated into the agency's assessment. There was also no evidence that a reference had been obtained for one of the applicants, who was employed in a children's service. No Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check was found in relation to one of the adopters and the (CRB) check for the second adopter had been obtained after the adoption panel had recommended the adopters for approval. Whilst the approval of these adopters was made prior to the commencement of the adoption national minimum standards (late 2002), nevertheless the checks should have been obtained prior to the adopters being considered by the panel for approval. Clearly CRB checks are of crucial importance in the safeguarding of children and therefore such issues of practice must not occur again.

There was evidence in some of the forms F that the agency considered adopters' capacity to look after children in a safe and responsible manner. However, no health and safety checklists or risk assessments in relation to adopters' pets were found on file. The introduction of such checklists and action plans should be considered, as it would provide an excellent means to assess adopters' ability to provide a safe environment. Managerial scrutiny of the assessment process should be increased, as this would ensure that all relevant matters in relation to the adopters and their immediate family have been fully assessed, the information analysed and all appropriate references and checks carried out.

The agency recognised the importance of children being matched with adopters who best met their needs, where such an ideal match could not be achieved, rather than allowing a child to wait indefinitely in the care system and their need for adoption compromised, children were matched to a family, who as closely as possible met their needs. In such situations, the agency provided support to the adoptive family so that any gaps in relation to the children's background and needs were met. The agency needs to ensure though that

such information is clearly and fully documented in the child's case record. Similarly, where a number of families express interest in adopting a child, the documentation needs to clearly detail the reasons why a particular family was matched with the child.

The agency had written information about the matching, introduction, placement process and support provided by the agency. One adoptive family, who was visited, spoke positively about this documentation stating that it had been extremely helpful in understanding both the pre and post placement processes in adoption. However, another adopter indicated the documents did not contain sufficient information, other adopters indicated that they had not seen the documents. This written information needs to be developed so that it is more informative, detailed and is provided to all adopters.

The agency had made strenuous efforts to improve the quality of information provided to adopters about a child, as evidenced by the training provided childcare workers in relation to the assessment of children's needs, child development and the purpose and contents required in forms E. Various guidance documents and aide memoirs, which had been incorporated in the adoption services handbook had been provided. These efforts were clearly appreciated by childcare staff and a number commented on the "tremendous help and support" provided them by the adoption manager and her team. However, despite all the work undertaken by the adoption team, the quality of the forms E found on some of the children's files were variable and on occasions not up-to-date. A quality assurance system had been introduced to address these issues, however the lateness of some forms meant that they were not quality assured by the panel adviser, before being presented to the adoption panel. This resulted in the panel having to address these matters and sometimes necessitated the case being deferred, thus giving rise to a potential delay in the care planning process. Recently quality assurance timescales in relation to these forms had been tightened up, which had resulted in an improvement in the quality of the forms E. Whilst endorsing this action, consideration needs to be given to form E training becoming part of the mandatory training provided to childcare workers.

Information from adopters indicated that the agency had provided them with as much information about the child as they possessed, however, given that children sometimes have a number of social workers whilst being a looked after child, the use of life appreciation days could be of benefit in providing firsthand, qualitative information about the child's life.

The children's records examined confirm that the children's wishes and feelings regarding their adoption plan had been taken into account, however this was not the case in every record. Similarly, in some children's records there was clear evidence that work was being undertaken to prepare and enable them to move into their adoptive placement, though in others where children had the same needs, such evidence was absent. There was a keen commitment to

improve childcare practice and their standards of recording from managers ans staff.

The Council's Child Protection Procedures do not specifically refer to children placed for adoption and this must be addressed. The agency must also ensure all staff have access to information, which would enable them to contact the Commission for Social Care Inspection regarding any concern about child welfare and safety. In addition, it is recommended that all adoption staff should receive up-dated child protection training.

The agency had clearly written policies and procedures in relation to the Adoption Panel, which were available to all staff and panel members. Whilst this documentation contained most of the information required, not all the matters referred to in 10.2 of the National Minimum Standards were addressed. To achieve full compliance with these standards, minor revision of these documents is necessary.

The agency's adoption panel was properly constituted. Observation of the panel demonstrated a sound operation of the agency's policies and procedures. Panel members clearly had a good knowledge and understanding of the complexity of adoption work and paid a great deal of attention to the details of the cases presented. Their thoroughness of scrutiny ensured relevant concerns were noted and effectively addressed. Panels were convened on a regular basis to avoid unnecessary delay in the approval of adopters or the matching of a child.

The panel minutes could be enhanced if the discussions that took place at panel were more fully detailed and the reasons for and conclusions reached by the panel outlined. The minutes would also be further improved, if they were structured in a clearer manner.

The agency decision – maker took his responsibilities very seriously and his practice was extremely child focussed. All panel papers and minutes were received and thoroughly examined, prior to the agency's decision being made. The agency's decision was made without delay and was quickly and effectively communicated to the prospective adopters, child and birth parents.

There were clearly written recruitment and selection procedures. However, the personnel files examined did not contain all the information required by regulation, for example, one file did not contain two written references. In addition there was a difficulty with one of the references and no evidence on file to indicate that this had been satisfactorily resolved. In another file, the information contained in two of the references was not satisfactory. Some files did not make it clear the status of the CRB check obtained. No external references were carried out in respect of internal appointments, nor were telephone enquiries made to verify the legitimacy of references. There was also no documentary evidence of relevant qualifications, although all staff were

registered with the General Social Care Council (GSCC). In some files there was no proof of identity, for example a recent photograph.

These matters were discussed with the head of the children's services at the end of the inspection, who immediately agreed to address them. The inspectors were impressed with the head of service's speed of response to these issues, at the time of writing this report, some of the matters referred to above had been dealt with and others were in the process of being addressed.

Enjoying and Achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- The adoption agency provides support for adoptive parents (NMS 6)
- The agency has access to specialist advisers as appropriate (NMS 18

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for standard(s) 6 & 18

The agency provides a variety of support and specialist advice for adoptive families, with a view to maintaining placement stability for children. However, the agency needs to develop a more coherent and comprehensive support strategy.

EVIDENCE:

Adoption support was a developing aspect of the agency's work, though there was clear commitment to its development, as illustrated by the appointment of a post adoption support advisor.

The support services included a variety of financial support packages for adopters and in both the pre and post adoption stages, adoption workers enabled the child and adopters, whether domestic or inter country to access and receive any counselling, therapeutic or support services required. The agency also employed a worker, on a part time basis, to undertake direct work with children, including those with attachment difficulties. There was a fast track system for adopted children to access the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAHMS). In addition, where there were difficulties in placement, the agency was able to spot purchase therapy packages from independent sources to support an adoptive family. The adoption agency had also established a newsletter and support groups for adopters. Assistance with contact arrangements was provided for adopted children and their birth relatives. In addition, the agency provided anyone residing in the borough, who had been involved in the adoption process an assessment for support.

The Council had a multi-agency Children's Services Strategy Group in place, which was the main mechanism for the planning, development and integration of services for children. This group had enabled the establishment of an inter-agency, multi – disciplinary children's service, known as, the looked after children's health and education services (LACHES). The service was designed to improve the life chances of children looked after in the borough. It was a

well-established service and had made a real impact on the health and education of looked after children. At the time of the inspection, the value of extending this service, where appropriate, to adopters and their children was being recognised.

Adopters had varied opinions about the written information provided regarding the agency's support services. One adoptive family stated that when they first adopted they had not received such written information from the agency. They saw this development as "all part of a real improvement to the service" and found the documentation "informative" and "useful." Two other adopters also expressed a similar view. One adopter though, suggested that the information could be presented in a clearer manner and its contents more detailed. Two other adopters indicated that they had not received such written information.

Similarly, adopters presented a mixed picture regarding the support services that they had received. Whilst some adopters stated that they had been well supported and the services provided by the agency had been "excellent"; others were not so complimentary and indicated there had been a lack of clarity regarding the services provided. One adoptive family stated that they believed the agency's support services compared unfavourably with those provided by a neighbouring adoption agency. Another adopter said there had been some uncertainty regarding the procedure to access financial support for a loft conversion, which had created some accommodation difficulties for the family. This was raised with the Head of the Children' s Services at the time of the inspection. He was fully aware of the situation and able to advise that a resolution to the matter was imminent.

The agency's preparation training provided adopters with information about a child's history and its relevance in enabling a child to develop a positive self - image. It also enabled adopters to understand the need for and develop strategies to assist a child to address all forms of discrimination. The importance of keeping safe information provided by birth families was clearly addressed through out the preparation and assessment process.

The agency had access to a legal adviser and a medical adviser. Staff confirmed that both advisers were available for consultation, if required and were said to be "most helpful". There was evidence that the adoption agency had procedures in place to access other specialisms, according to their needs. The agency also had written protocols governing the role of specialist advisers.

There had been one adoption disruption during the past year and the family had been provided with appropriate information and support. In such situations the agency holds a disruption meeting. There was evidence that these meetings were handled in an extremely sensitive, thoughtful and constructive manner, with any learning gained by the agency, being carefully considered and incorporated into the agency's future practice.

Making a Positive Contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- Birth parents and birth families are involved in adoption plans (NMS 7)
- Birth parents and birth families are involved in maintaining the child's heritage (NMS 8)
- The Adoption agency supports birth parents and families (NMS 9)

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for standard(s) 7,8,& 9

The agency demonstrated a commitment to developing and improving the support provided to birth parents and their families so that they may fully contribute to their child's future. There is a need though for the agency to ensure consistency of practice in this area.

EVIDENCE:

The Council clearly valued birth parents and their families, as demonstrated by the recent introduction of family group conferencing into children's services. The principles, values and individual's rights, which underpinned these conferences, together with the engagement of families in the early stages of their difficulties, provided a good foundation for the continued involvement of families in the child's care planning process, should this prove to be necessary.

There was evidence that birth parents and families were encouraged to be fully involved in the care planning process for their child and staff worked with them in an open and honest manner. This to the work was also demonstrated in the adoption workers' practice, for whilst being sensitive to the issues and concerns of parents, whose children were to be adopted, the life long implications of this plan were openly discussed. Whilst adoption workers worked with birth parents to ensure the child's plan for adoption was effectively implemented; the agency also provided parents with the opportunity to access a worker independent from the authority. In addition, the agency provided information about independent local and national support groups and commissioned Barnardo's to provide an independent counselling service to birth parents.

Birth parents' views about adoption and contact were clearly recorded on the files seen. However, whilst inspectors were advised that birth parents were aware of the information about them, which was presented to panel, this was

not always evidenced in the files examined, for example, some form "E" s were not signed by parents. The inspectors were also informed that birth parents have the opportunity to address the adoption panel in written communication, should they wish to do so. This was not evidenced in the particular files examined, however, the inspectors would commend such practice and recommend this information should be more actively promoted.

The agency's policies recognised birth parents and their families' inclusion in the adoption processes and encouraged them to provide information in order to contribute to the child's sense of heritage. However, whilst childcare staff clearly recognised the importance of life story work, several workers stated that they felt unable to complete such work due to a lack of knowledge, skills and training, others indicated that work pressures precluded them. The completion of this work is clearly of vital importance for the child and assists placement stability; as a consequence it was generally the adoption worker who completed such work.

Information obtained indicated the quality of life storybooks was variable, ranging from excellent to reasonable. One adoptive family, who had two siblings were very impressed with the life storybook, which they had received for their second child, stating that it contained a lot more photographs of the birth family. They stated that this was due to their workers' strenuous efforts and skills in working with the birth parents/family stating that she was "determined to be successful in the task" and "to go the extra mile". The issues raised by the child care social workers regarding life story work, clearly needs to be considered and a decision made as to who in the organisational is best equipped to undertake this task, effectively.

Birth parents and families were given further opportunities to pass on information through later life letters, direct or indirect contact via the agency's post box system. The examination of some children's files indicated that there was some inconsistency in the use of later life letters, however, there were also some examples of very thoughtful and sensitive letters being written, which were likely to prove extremely helpful to the child. The post box system also which was managed by a dedicated administrator, provided birth parents and their families a real opportunity to contribute to the maintenance of their child's heritage. This system was managed by a dedicated administrator and was found to be robust and well organised.

Management

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- There is a clear written statement of the aims and objectives of the adoption agency and the adoption agency ensures that it meets those aims and objectives (NMS 1)
- The agency provides clear written information for prospective adopters (NMS 3)
- The manager has skills to carry on or manage the adoption agency (NMS 14)
- The adoption agency is managed effectively and efficiently (NMS 16)
- The agency is monitored and controlled as specified (NMS 17)
- The staff are organised and managed effectively (NMS 20)
- The agency has sufficient staff with the right skills / experience (NMS 21)
- The agency is a fair and competent employer (NMS 22)
- The agency provides training for staff (NMS 23)
- Case records for children and prospective / approved adopters are comprehensive and accurate (NMS 25)
- The agency provides access to records as appropriate (NMS 26)
- The agency's administrative records processes are appropriate (NMS 27)
- The agency maintains personnel files for members of staff and members of adoption panels (NMS 28)
- The premises used by the adoption agency are suitable for purpose (NMS 29)
- The adoption agency is financially viable (NMS 30, Voluntary Adoption Agency only)
- The adoption agency has robust financial processes (NMS 31)

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for standard(s) 1, 3, 14. 16, 17, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 26, 27, 28 & 29.

The agency's managerial team was in the process of being established; although early indications were that the agency was being managed in an efficient and effective manner. A robust quality assurance and monitoring system was required though, if the agency was to ensure a good quality service and outcomes for children and adopters.

EVIDENCE:

The agency had a statement of purpose, which had been approved by the executive side of the Council in July 2005. Whilst this statement contained most of the information required, the relevant qualifications and experience of the staff employed in the adoption team needs to be expanded upon. The statement should also reflect the fact that if a complaint remains unresolved, the Commission is a source where such a complaint can be directed. In addition, it is recommended that the office address and telephone number of CSCI be revised to reflect the adoption team's base.

The adoption service's children's guide was a colourful and child friendly document, which contained much of the information required. However, if this guide is to meet the standard it needs to be produced in other formats, so that it is suitable for children of different ages. In addition, the guide should contain the office address and the telephone number of CSCI. The contact details of the Children's Rights Director were also inaccurate and this should be amended. In revising this guide the agency may wish to consider whether it could be more attractively presented.

A number of the agency's policy and procedures had recently been amended to accurately reflect the revised statement of purpose. These documents had been incorporated in the Adoption Services handbook, which had been recently circulated to staff. This policy and procedural handbook was clearly extremely useful to staff, however not all the childcare staff were aware of its existence. In view of this, it is recommended that the agency officially launch this procedural handbook to all childcare staff.

The agency provided an information pack to all those who made enquiries about adoption. This pack was in a user-friendly form and contained clear, well - written information about the adoption process. Information was also provided about the needs of local children, who required families, though this required further expansion. Two adopters, who were previously foster carers, indicated that they had not received this written information. The agency needs to ensure that all foster carers, who then apply to adopt, receive the same information as other adopters.

The agency clearly had systems in place to prioritise prospective adopters, who were most likely meet the needs of children waiting for adoptive parents and there was evidence of such prospective adopters being fast tracked through the system.

A new service and team manager had recently been appointed to the agency. Both managers were extremely knowledgeable, experienced and skilled in this field of work. Staff interviewed spoke highly of the managers, respected them and had confidence in their ability as a management team to take the service

forward. Their management style was described as open and supportive, with staff stating that they were always "accessible", "approachable" and "helpful". One member of staff described the team manager, as being a "fountain of Knowledge, where adoption is concerned" and another said she was "very supportive and her rock".

The agency had clear managerial arrangements in place to identify who was in charge when the manager was absent. There were clear roles for managers and staff, with well-established lines of communication and accountability. The newly formed management team needed to obtain a shared understanding of quality assurance and to adopt a unified approach to such issues. In addition, the team should consider developing their current audit tool. The agency had a supervisory and appraisal system, which was used to monitor staff's performance and ensure a quality of service. There was evidence though that some staff were not being supervised and appraised, in accordance with the agency's policies, this needs to be addressed.

There were a number of procedures in place for monitoring and controlling the activities of the adoption service. These procedures included a tracking system to monitor the care planning process for the child, which commenced from the time adoption was first considered to the making of the order. This tracking system was regularly reviewed by the adoption team and by the senior management team during their monthly performance management meetings. In addition, the Corporate Parenting Panel carefully scrutinised the adoption agency' activities through the regular management information, which they received. The executive side of the Council also received a six monthly, as well as an annual report, which outlined the work of the agency and the business objectives for the forthcoming year. Interviews with members of the senior management team, as well as the lead member for children's services, confirmed that staff and councillors took their corporate parenting role seriously and carefully scrutinised all information presented.

Staff working within the adoption agency were well informed about adoption and had the necessary qualifications and skills to undertake the work. Adopters made a number of very positive comments about individual social workers and their practice, for example, workers were described as "highly professional", "very knowledgeable in adoption"," showed a real commitment to her work", "assessed us in a sensitive and thoughtful manner", she was "brilliant". Whilst the agency clearly had sufficient adoption workers to meet its needs, the composition of the team did not reflect the ethnicity of the community. The managers of the agency need to consider how this may impact on the service and address the matter accordingly.

Positive comments were also made about the team's administrator, who was described as "efficient", "polite", "friendly" and "helpful". The administrative support provided to the adoption team was of an excellent standard and was of great assistance in enabling staff to carry out their work in an effective and

efficient manner. In view of recent legislation and the increased demands likely to be made on the service, the agency needs to review the current administrative resources provided the service.

The managers and staff interviewed generally considered the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham to be a fair and competent employer. The agency enabled staff to access internal and external training and post qualification study, as part of their professional development. However, staff had differing views about the effectiveness of support given them to undertake this training; for whilst some staff spoke positively about the support provided; other staff did not feel as supported indicating the training would be more effectively facilitated, if their work load were to be reduced. Adoption staff though generally felt well supported; stated the training was of good quality and effectively met their needs.

There were written policies and procedures in place for case recording, as well as the maintenance and formatting of adoption case records. An examination of these records though indicated that these policies and procedures were not always being followed, as evidenced by the fact that some correspondence relating to the adopters had been filed on the children's file. In another adopters' file the checklist relating to statutory checks and enquiries had not been fully completed and there was no indication of the status of the adopters' CRB. In one adopters' file, there was an appropriate delay in the assessment however, the file had no evidence to indicate their views about this delay and indeed whether they were in agreement. The disruption meeting minutes were missing in another adopters' file.

Similarly, with regard to the children's files there were documents missing, for example one child's file did not contain a birth certificate, care plan or later life letter. In one file a matching report was missing, in another an adoption support plan and one file did not contain a later life letter. In one child's file there was no recorded evidence that the statutory visits had been undertaken in accordance with legislation. Whilst in other files the lack of clarity in recording made it difficult to ascertain whether the statutory visits had been carried out and the child seen by the worker. In two case files some of the documentation related to their siblings and were not therefore maintained in accordance with legislation. In another file, the diction used in one report was inappropriate and judgemental. In one file, the date of birth on the looked after children's (lac) documentation differed to the birth certificate and in other files the lac documentation was not up-to-date and the minutes of the latest lac review were missing.

In both the adopters and children's files, some documentation was hand written and difficult to read and in other files the documentation was not always up-to-date.

The agency had good systems in place to ensure confidentiality and access to records, which were in accordance with current legislation. Staff were fully aware of these systems and ensured that there was strict adherence to them.

There was a written policy on the confidentiality of case records and their storage. Evidence confirmed that staff, panel members and specialist advisors understood these instructions, though a system should be developed to monitor compliance.

Separate records were kept of complaints, allegations and staff, including agency staff and there was evidence to confirm all the agency' s adoption records were stored securely.

The agency should risk assess all adoption records to ensure they are stored in a manner to minimise the risk of damage from fire or water. This should also include the archived records.

There was a disaster recovery plan for the agency but this requires developing. The agency's adoption records were not effectively safeguarded through an appropriate back up system and some attention should be given to this.

The agency had a system to monitor the quality and adequacy of records, however this system required developing and a recommendation has been made regarding this.

Personnel and panel members' files, as discussed earlier in the report, did not comply with the adoption regulations and this must be addressed.

The adoption agency had identifiable office premises, which had disabled access and were fit for purpose.

SCORING OF OUTCOMES

This page summarises the assessment of the extent to which the National Minimum Standards for Adoption have been met and uses the following scale.

4 Standard Exceeded (Commendable) **3** Standard Met (No Shortfalls)
2 Standard Almost Met (Minor Shortfalls) **1** Standard Not Met (Major Shortfalls)

"X" in the standard met box denotes standard not assessed on this occasion
"N/A" in the standard met box denotes standard not applicable

BEING HEALTHY	
Standard No	***Score***
No NMS are mapped to this outcome	

MAKING A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION	
Standard No	***Score***
7	2
8	3
9	3

STAYING SAFE	
Standard No	***Score***
2	2
4	2
5	3
10	2
11	2
12	3
13	3
15	1
19	1
24	N/A

ACHIEVING ECONOMIC WELLBEING	
Standard No	***Score***
No NMS are mapped to this outcome	

ENJOYING AND ACHIEVING	
Standard No	***Score***
6	2
18	3

MANAGEMENT	
Standard No	***Score***
1	2
3	2
14	3
16	3
17	2
20	3
21	3
22	3
23	3
25	2
26	3
27	2
28	1
29	2
30	N/A
31	N/A

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection? N/A

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Voluntary Adoption and the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2003 or Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations 2003 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

No.	Standard	Regulation	Requirement	Timescale for action
1.	4	The adoption agency regs.1983 8(2)(h)	A 28-day waiver notice in respect of the adopters' written assessment should be held on file, where this is applicable.	1/01/2006
2.	11,15,18, 19 & 28	Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regs 2003 6(2)(c), 11(3)(d), 15(1) & Schedules 3 & 4	The manager of the service must ensure that information is held on all persons who work for the adoption service in accordance with Schedule 3 and 4. This applies to all staff, panel members and specialist advisors, who provide services to the agency.	1/12/05
3.	4	Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regs 2003 7(a)(b).	The agency must implement and maintain robust quality assurance systems for all aspects of adoption service.	1/01/2006
4.	2,4, 11 &25	The adoption agency regs.1983 14 (2) &	The manager must ensure that where a case record has been set up by an adoption agency, any report, recommendation made by the agency must be	1/12/2005

		the Data Protection Act	placed on the case record relating to that child.	
5.	18 &28.	Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regs 2003 10(b)	The agency must ensure that those working for the service are suitably qualified and competent. In view of this documentary evidence must be obtained in relation to panel members and specialist advisors' registration with the appropriate professional bodies. This evidence must be held on their file.	1/01/2006
6.	19,20 &21	Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regs 2003 10(a) & 10(b	The manager of the service must ensure that there are a sufficient number of competent, experienced social work and administrative staff working for the purposes of the adoption agency.	1/01/2006
7.	2	Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regs 2003 9(1)(a)(b)	The agency must ensure that its child protection policies and procedures specifically refer to the measures intended to safeguard children placed for adoption by the authority from abuse and neglect. They should also include arrangements to be made for persons working for the adoption agency, prospective adopters and children who have been placed for adoption by the authority to have access to information that will enable them to contact the Commisssion regarding any concern about a child's welfare and safety.	1/01/2006
8.	1	Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regs 2003 2(1) & Schedule 1	The manager of the service must ensure that the Statement of Purpose contains all the information required in Schedule 1 of the Adoption Services Regulations, 2003.	1/02/2006
9.	1	Local	The manager of the service must	1/02/2006

		Authority Adoption Service (England) Regs 2003 3(1) & Schedule 2	include in the children's guide, all the information contained in Schedule 2 of the Adoption Services Regulations 2003.	
10.		Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regs 2003 4(a)(B)	The manager of the service must keep under review and where appropriate revise the Statement of Purpose and the Children's Guide. The Commission must be notified of any such revision within 28 days.	1/03/2006
11.	25	The adoption agency regs.1983 7(2)(a), schedule 1, part I and LAC (97) 13	The manager of the agency must ensure a case record is set up for a child, where the adoption agency is considering adoption for a child. This case record must contain the information specified in the Adoption Agency Regulations 1983 and the guidance provided in the local government circular.	1/12/2005
12.	25	The adoption agency regs.1983 8(2)(b)(d) schedule 1 part VI & Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regs 2003 Schedule 1,part V1,V11	Where the adoption agency is considering a person may be suitable to be an adoptive parent, the manager of the agency must ensure a case record is set up. This case record must contain the information specified in the Adoption Agency Regulations 1983 and 2003.	1/12/2005
13.				

RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations relate to National Minimum Standards and are seen as good practice for the Registered Provider/s to consider carrying out.

No.	Refer to Standard	Good Practice Recommendations
1.	2	A focused recruitment strategy should be developed. Consideration should also be given to adopting a more proactive and creative approach to the recruitment of adopters from minority ethnic backgrounds.
2.	4	Foster carers, who wish to adopt should receive the same preparation training, assessment and support services, as those provided other prospective adopters.
3.	4	Times held for preparation groups should be kept under review to ensure they remain appropriate to the needs of adopters.
4.	4	Consideration should be given to establishing preparation groups for second time adopters and relative adopters.
5.	4	Prospective adopters should be kept fully informed of their progress at each stage in the assessment and approval process.
6.	4	The agency should ensure that the views of the applicants' children are ascertained and taken into account in any adoption application.
7.	4	The agency should consider developing its health and safety checklist. This checklist should be applied in a consistent manner in all assessments carried out by the agency.
8.	4&6	Written information regarding the agency's support services which is provided adopters should be developed.
9.	5	The agency should consider training on form E 's being a standing item on the training programme for childcare staff.
10.	5	Consideration should be given to the introduction of life appreciation days into the service.
11.	6 & 25	The agency should ensure that clear and appropriate information is obtained for the child about themselves and life before adoption. This information should be provided in a timely manner and in accordance with their needs.
12.	6	A clear, coherent and comprehensive strategy should be developed in relation to the agency' support services.
13.	10	The Adoption Policies and Procedures should be revised to ensure the matters raised in standard 10.2 of the Adoption National Minimum Standards are met.
14.	11	The current arrangements for the team manager to also

		act as the panel adviser may give rise to potential conflicts and should be reviewed.
15.	12	The agency should review the current format and information in the adoption panel minutes.
16.	7	The agency should consistently evidence that a birth parent has been provided with a copy of the form "E" and their views regarding the contents recorded.
17.	7	The inclusion of birth parents in the adoption process should be more proactively promoted in the literature provided birth parents and other professionals, who may be working with them.
18.	1	The agency should officially launch the Adoption Services Handbook to ensure all child care staff are aware of it.
19.	20&21	The agency should ensure the managerial team is fully complement
20.	17	The audit tool used by the agency should be developed.
21.	25	The agency should risk assess all adoption records to ensure that they are stored in such a manner to minimise the risk of damage from fire and water.
22.	25	To aid the legibility of records, consideration should be given to records being typed. The agency should also ensure that all records are signed and dated, by both staff and managers.
23.	27	The adoption agency's disaster recovery plan should be revised.
24.	27	The manager of the agency should make provision for the safeguarding and back up of the agency's records.

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