

Education & Children's Services scrutiny sub-committee

11 December 2014

Adoption focus group with adopters and potential adopters

Present:

- Cllr Jasmine Ali, Chair
- Cllr Evelyn Akoto, committee member
- Julie Timbrell, Project manager (notes)

The adopters introduced themselves and explained their situations:

- K – Approved in April and waiting for a child
- T – Recently adopted a small child
- M – Adopted a little boy 2 and half years ago. Runs a voluntary adoption support network, with local meet ups and links with the South London adoption consortium.
- R – Adopted a young child a year and a half ago.
- J – Adopted a young child through Lewisham Council.
- D – Recently started the process with partner

Assessment process

Adopters reported that this is quite intrusive – but they all agreed that this is to be expected.

It was suggested that there was a FAQ resource – covering issues such what happens post panel assessment , guidance on how to discuss adoption with siblings, and a longer reading list (beyond the material already given).

Adopters said the quality of the assessment process was largely down to the quality of the social worker. The majority of the social workers were highly praised – other comments were that social workers who had transferred from other types of practice or other boroughs were less well informed. One person asked for a social work transfer because the relationship was not working. One inexperienced social worker wanted to meet a parent's natural child at school, which did not feel appropriate to the parents because they felt it over exposed them and another adoptive parent. A few people had a number of social workers, because of reasons such as maternity leave, and this was difficult as adopters explained it was a very personal relationship that takes time to build – continuity is important.

Timing of assessment process

There were comments that the 6 month assessment process was fudged as the clock only starts from when the paperwork is in place and that the induction & registration process is used to gather information to facilitate this, then once an potential adopter is interested there is a wait until a social worker is free, which takes about 4 months. However everybody seemed to think that 6 months was too quick anyway and that most adopters needed more time, however there was a little frustration with pauses after certain stages, such post the panel decision. Many parents emphasised the value of waiting, despite many potential parents really wanting a child almost immediately, initially.

Racial profiling

One adoptee reported that 4 years ago she had been turned down as an adopter in Southwark as she was white – she said that really hurt, although she accepted there might have been good reason as the council only had black children. She went on to successfully adopt in Lewisham. She thought a reason like this would be unlikely now, as the government’s position on inter-racial adoption has changed, nevertheless she was still recently told in Lewisham that as her existing children were white she would only be considered for a quarter mix child – and this did not seem to be a position that she particularly shared.

Other adoptees shared that social workers had asked them what there views were and explored this issue sensitively and considered potential adopters wider networks, and checked back with the adopters on their views, for example by ensuring their preferences were accurately presented at panel.

Some adopters wanted a child to closely match to their own ethnicity, for a variety of reasons including a lack of a wider network or a wish to move to the countryside, which would be less diverse. One mixed race adopter with a white partner had adopted a black child because she knew she had a wider family community network that would reflect the adopted child’s background.

A couple of adopters noted that they had had unusual racial backgrounds which were harder to match, and they did not think this was a priority anyway. One thought the ethnic match was over emphasised by social workers, and might have closed down options or caused a longer wait.

Southwark has a smallish minority of cross ethnic adoptions, but views on how widespread this practice was varied. Participants agreed this is an issue to be openly explored .Adopters emphasised the importance of the child’s needs coming first, but that it was also important to find a balance with the parents’ needs and desires.

It was noted that views on inter-racial adoptions shift as fashions change and also that it is a complex and complicated issue.

Contact with birth family and birth stories

Quite a few people noted that the birth stories had taken a long time to complete. One person suggested this was given a dedicated resource, though it was also noted that the social workers involved in this exercise need to know the child and family well. One person felt uncomfortable with the language in the story for her child; commenting it was too black and white with too much emphasis on drugs, and the language was inappropriate. There was concern that identifying information had been put in by Lewisham (a birth certificate) and this could have enabled the child to use social media to search out a natural parent.

It was common to have letter box annual contact. Some had met the parents. Issues were raised about the complexity of wider birth families and the difficult issues this could present, now and possibly in the future. The support of the adoptees network was highlighted as really important in providing a peer support network which could understand the specific issues of adoptive parents – equivalent to the NCT network, which birth parents have.

Motivation

Preparation stage

The presentation day was described as pretty bleak. Several adopters commented that this reflected the reality, but something uplifting would be good to create a balance. One person affirmed the importance of being presented with the reality of the challenges, and commented that around half of all perspective adopters will leave the process and that as an adopter you do need to be determined. Another adoptive parent said that it gives the impression that all children have been raped and beaten. There were comments that social workers are not necessarily presenters and communicators. The professionalism of the package has improved. Most emphasised the need for a balanced presentation and all praised the stories of adoptive parents who spoke about the good and the bad, and also the story provided by a mother who had given up a child for adoption. The importance of reality over theory was emphasised and that adoptive parents be involved in training (one was).

The peer support network was praised – this meets alternate Wednesday afternoons for parents and children, hosts monthly Saturday trips and also holds a regular parent support evening. It is a space to talk freely without pity. This was set up by an adoptive mum. The network feeds back up to the London Adoptive Board.

Post adoption support.

All the adopters praised the good support immediately after adoption, with alternate weekly visits from the child's and parents' social worker. However the 3 year mark can be when support drops off. Dealing with school is hard, and parents commented they found it hard to access support packages. More training of teachers on the needs of adoptive children and the type of support available was recommended.