

Dudley MBC Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Vivien Slyfield
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Date of last inspection	24/05/2004

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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 Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council Adoption Service is based at Falcon House near the centre of Dudley. It shares these premises with the fostering service and has a good working relationship with this team. The service aims to provide adoptive families for those children and young people in Dudley for whom adoption is the plan. The adoption team recruits, assesses, prepare, trains and supports adoptive parents, including those wishing to adopt from abroad. It provides counselling for parents wishing to place their child for adoption and for other birth families whose children have been placed for adoption. Counselling is also provided for adopted adults seeking information about their birth families.

The team undertake assessments for non-agency applications to adopt, including step-parent applications.

The service undertakes home-finding for Dudley children needing adoptive families and works closely with the children's social workers in doing so. Advice and consultancy is very much part of the role of the service.

Throughout the work of the service there is a close collaborative relationship with the other Black Country authorities through the Adoption in the Black Country (ABC) project.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This inspection was undertaken by two inspectors over four days during which adopters and a birth family were seen, staff and managers interviewed including the ASSA, two Independent Reviewing Officers, the agency decision maker and the panel chair. A selection of files were seen of adopters, children, adoption support assessments, panel member's files and personnel files. Panel was observed on an additional day.

Improvements since the last inspection

There are improvements across the whole of the adoption service. Some specific areas of particular note are that although there is a need to increase the staffing level the team is currently fully staffed, with committed, skilled and enthusiastic staff. Adoption support has built on the established post and has formed effective links with education, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and Adoption Support.

The accommodation is improved since the last inspection, but is in need of further work to meet the required standard.

The working relationships between adoption, fostering and child care teams are viewed positively by all those involved and working effectively to deliver a good service for children.

The relationship with the other Black Country authorities has progressed and is providing a range of benefits, not least the provision of external training which could be difficult to fund as a single authority. The ABC project's growth has seen the improvement in the information evenings and the establishment of the Meet the Children forums.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

Recruiting is well managed and organised by the recruitment officer in Adoption in the Black Country project (ABC). The post of recruitment officer is funded by all the local authorities in the ABC project but directly managed by Dudley. At the time of the last inspection ABC had only recently started and since then has 'gone from strength to strength'. Annual reports show an increase in the number of enquiries received and improvements in the number of applications from these enquiries. The project runs and co-ordinates information evenings throughout the Black Country. The impact of a professionally skilled recruitment officer is notable in the material and approach to the work and provides valuable analysis for all the ABC authorities. Dudley adoption team is proactive in using this recruitment project and is clear in identifying the needs of children with adoption as their plan. ABC also run 'Meet the Children' evenings, which provide an informal setting for approved adopters across the region. The recruitment officer invited some adopters from the National Adoption Register (NAR) and some from authorities outside those in ABC. Social workers viewed this event very positively and felt links had been made as a result of the meeting. Analysis of resulting matches and placement success is due to take place in considering the effectiveness of this strategy.

The preparation course was seen by adopters as being 'very good and well run'. It is run in conjunction with all the ABC authorities, they each run two course per year and their prospective adopters attend whichever is the soonest and most convenient course. This approach provides applicants with a real choice over how long they wait and whether the course is full days or evenings or a combination. There are twice yearly meetings with the ABC authorities to share practice and ensure consistency. Information is passed from course leaders to the assessing worker to ensure issues

are followed up and included in the assessment. It would be useful to consider opening attendance to a supporter when a single applicant is attending.

The assessment reports are variable in quality, some are good. The social workers have a clear understanding of the aims of this work and reported that recent training had provided them with a 'toolkit' to use which will clarify the use of competencies and strengthen analysis. There is also a need to clarify that employer, other local authority references are needed as well as from other countries when an applicant has lived abroad. The Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check needs to state on the file that it is enhanced. The way in which diversity is addressed in the assessments is focused in most exclusively on race and needs to be broadened to include all areas of diversity. There are examples of some thoughtful and well considered assessments, including the example of observation of applicants with children within their extended family. Adopters felt that assessments are thorough and undertaken with sensitivity, one comment on a file stated the assessment was a 'well considered and comprehensive report, which summarises an assessment conducted with sensitivity and rigor ...(the social worker was) extremely helpful throughout'.

Workers commented positively about the development of the new adoption panel. Adopters are routinely invited to attend if they wish to and supported in doing so. They felt well prepared and made to feel welcome. It is positive to note the use of feedback forms is established for all those attending panel. Social workers did not report difficulties with securing timely dates for panel attendance and there is an effective system in place to hold emergency panels if necessary. The panel observed showed members are well prepared, fully involved in the meeting and well able to contribute. The appointment of panel members must ensure that all members have the relevant checks and references, which is not currently the case on all panel member's files. The panel process needs some thought to ensure siblings are each given full consideration and that panel members have appropriate time to discuss the matters presented. Panel should have the opportunity to consider their recommendation without the applicant being present and applicants given some choice about how and where the recommendation is delivered. Strengthening of the panel process will assist the minutes. Parts of the minutes are extremely good but they need to ensure that they are an accurate record of all those attending, that the initial used for the adopters remains the same throughout and that the reasons for the panel recommendation are fully recorded for each matter considered. One panel member commented 'Dudley has remained child-focused. I always knew we were discussing real children whom we were all concerned about.' This is evident in the panel observed and in the attitude of those involved.

The agency decision maker gives detailed and full consideration of the matters presented to panel. She raises any issue of concern with the panel adviser and has regular meetings with the panel chair. However, delays are noted on the files seen in the time taken for the decisions to be made, in five of the files seen decisions were not made within seven days. Letters of notification need to ensure it is clear who has responsibility for the decision.

All the adopters seen felt they had all the information about the children they are

matched with, which was available to the social workers. This includes meetings with the medical adviser. Social workers commented that the medical adviser is approachable and worked well with adopters.

The nominated manager and staff are suitable and appropriate checks and references have been undertaken in their appointment. The service is child focused and this was evident throughout the inspection. There is a need to ensure children are safeguarded through explicit inclusion of children placed for adoption in the child protection procedures, these must include situations of historical abuse. This has been identified by the adoption team manager who has requested a change to procedures.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Dudley had previously had an adoption support worker in place and has developed this work further with the addition of two new members of staff. This is the biggest area of growth of new referrals for the service. The workers are committed, enthusiastic and knowledgeable. They have developed important partnerships with Adoption UK, the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), Dudley Psychological and the Education services. The team run bi-monthly support groups, a duty system to deal with enquiries, a Buddy Scheme, newsletter and apply for financial support when appropriate. They undertake adoption support assessments and design packages of support to assist adoptive families. Through joint work with ABC high quality training has been provided, such as 'Piece of Cake' and places on a Dan Hughes talk. The work of adoption support social workers is viewed very positively by adopters and staff. There is a clear child focus and awareness of safeguarding issues in the approach of the staff. The adoption support workers are part of the adoption team and there is a strong commitment from all staff that the issues raised and knowledge gained through adoption support should be used to inform and develop the assessment of adopters.

The role of the Adoption Support Service Adviser (ASSA) has been thoughtfully placed at the third tier of management in the organisation. The position is used effectively to raise adoption with other organisations and services through regular liaison. The ASSA meets four times a year with the adoption support workers, which allows clear communication of current issues. There is a strong commitment to adoption and the needs of children and their adoptive families that translated into effective work.

There is an established protocol for the use of the specialist advisers. There is effective and accessible legal advice. Staff were positive about the knowledge, experience and skills of the medical adviser. There are examples, however, of difficulties in information being available when it is needed, causing delay and of a lack of clarity about other medical practitioners undertaking adoption medicals for children. A capacity issue in relation to the medical adviser's time is identified by a number of individuals.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

There is evidence of sensitive and empathic work with birth families. Some of this is evident on Child Placement Reports (CPR) although birth parent's views were not recorded on all those seen. Independent support is offered to birth families through Adoption Support in Birmingham, who will visit in Dudley if necessary. Work has been commissioned to look at birth family involvement in order to consider developments within the service. Birth parents seen were aware of the support available and had leaflets providing this information.

Life Appreciation Days are well established in Dudley. They take place before introductions and are highly valued by staff and adopters. There is a positive view of these events as effective and efficient methods of exchanging information, which are valued at all levels of the organisation.

Children's social workers show a clear commitment to involving birth families in recording information for children. Life story work is undertaken and although some worker found it difficult to allocate time to this there is management support to do so and the possibility of work being outsourced if needed. Workers are clear that the life story book is a part of this work and aimed to have the book with the child prior to the adoption order being made. Adopters are aware of the significance of background information for children and treated information and possessions with respect. Memory boxes are in use with some of the adopters seen.

An active letterbox exchange system is in place and is managed by all the adoption support social workers between them. As well as managing the exchanges the workers offer support and advice with the letters and copy information and send reminders. This is supported by a new database, which was devised by administrative staff. It would be useful to consider extending the administrative support to other aspects of the letterbox. Direct contact is also supported by the adoption support workers. They will supervise contact and provide support o both birth families and adopters.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

There is a statement of purpose in place which complies with the regulations. It would be helpful to look at this document again in consideration of its purpose and

whether all the information included is needed. The Ofsted address should be the National Business Unit, 3rd Floor, Royal Exchange Building, St Ann's Sq, Manchester.

The information provided for prospective adopters is clear, well paced and well presented.

The managers involved in the adoption service are skilled, knowledgeable and experienced. Roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and there is effective communication throughout the service. Staff commented that managers at all levels are approachable. One worker said that managers are 'very responsive and flexible'. The team manager's expertise is appreciated by both adoption and child care staff. Effective management has enabled good working relationships to be established between the adoption and child care staff. The children's social workers commented that the adoption team 'really get to know the children' and that 'it doesn't feel like them and us. It's a real partnership'. 'They go the extra mile to help us'. The relationship with the fostering team and flow of information is seen as having improved and developed since being in the current premises, conveying a sense of all working together. Although resources are limited there is evidence of creative and constructive use of what is available.

Monitoring of the service is well established with quarterly reports to the council. The lead councillor is aware of the issues involved in the service and of current developments and difficulties.

Staff are well supported through regular supervision and through consultation with colleagues and managers as the need arises. Training is valued by the service and staff reported that post qualifying training is actively encouraged, although it is still difficult to find the study time needed. One worker said, 'opportunities for external training here have been really brilliant'. Although this is positive there is a sense in which staff are really stretched at all levels. Administrative staff commented that they have raised this issue and are aware it is being 'looked at'. Adoption support is a growing area of service and the increasing demand has meant staff are working at beyond full capacity. The ABC recruitment officer remains one post undertaking a wide range of effective, professional marketing. Further development in this area will be restricted if there are no increases in staffing. The team manager is in effect covering the role of assistant team manager as well as her own acting-up post and the role of panel advisor. The latter is particularly an issue as through supervision of the adoption staff she has responsibility for the work presented to panel. The establishment of a separate role would allow the quality assurance of panel to be strengthened.

Staff have a very positive view of working for Dudley, as is evident from the length of service of some of those interviewed. One worker said 'this is the longest I've worked for anyone' and another 'it's a really friendly local authority'. The adoption team is seen as an especially good environment to work in 'this team is so together, a really pleasant place to be. Practice is developing almost daily' and 'I'm really chuffed to work for this team'.

The records storage is appropriate. A monitoring form is available but due to staffing constraints is not currently in use. The adoption files for children are not compliant with the regulations, but there are new guidelines being developed to address this. Personnel files are compliant with regulations, but it would make sense to record the telephone verification of references on these files. The panel member's files need to have two references for all members and telephone verification of these. There were no complaints within the last year and information relating to regulation 17 is reported to be held within the central complaints system.

The premises are a considerable improvement on those used during the last inspection. However the lack of soundproofing between the walls of the interview rooms raises concerns about confidentiality. There are also concerns, shared by staff, about the security of the offices as the main reception to the building is not always staffed and access to the adoption team offices is then open, with no clear reception. The open plan nature of the premises means that more interview rooms are needed than the current number available.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
11	ensure that all panel members are subject to the checks identified in schedules 3 and 4 of the LAA Regs 2003 prior to starting work on the panel	28/09/2007

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- consider the support for single applicants during the preparation course (National Minimum Standard 4)
- clarify when references or sought from other local authorities, other countries, previous partners and employers. Diversity needs to be fully addressed in the assessments and the CRB check should specify it is at the enhanced level (National Minimum Standard 4)
- reconsider the panel process to ensure full and free recommendations are made with sufficient time allowed and that the needs of each sibling are fully addressed

(National Minimum Standard 10)

- ensure that panel minutes are a full and accurate record of the matters considered and record all those in attendance (National Minimum Standard 12)
- make decisions in relation to the matters presented to the adoption panel and send the appropriate letters of notification within the recommended timescales making it clear who is responsible for the decision (National Minimum Standard 13)
- ensure that the requested changes to the safeguarding procedures take place to specify children placed for adoption and situations of historical abuse (National Minimum Standard 32)
- ensure that an adequate amount of medical adviser time is available to ensure the effective operation of the service (National Minimum Standard 18)
- consideration should be given to increasing the administrative support provided for the letterbox exchange (National Minimum Standard 8)
- review the staffing provision with particular focus on adoption support, administrative roles, the ABC project and the panel adviser (National Minimum Standard 21)
- ensure the premises used are suitable for the purposes of the agency (National Minimum Standard 29)
- carry out the proposed changes to the children's adoption files which will ensure compliance with the regulations (National Minimum Standard 25)