

# Wolverhampton City Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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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 Wolverhampton City Council Adoption Service is based in the Beldray Building in Bilston. The service aims to provide adoptive families for those children and young people in Wolverhampton for whom adoption is the plan. The adoption team recruits, assesses, prepares, 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 has an agreement with Adoption Support for birth families whose children have been placed for adoption. The team undertake assessments for non-agency applications to adopt, including step-parent applications.

The service undertakes home-finding for Wolverhampton children needing adoptive families and works with the children's social workers in doing so.

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. This recruits adopters for the ABC authorities and provides information evenings for early linking information. The ABC authorities share preparation training and work together to improve the adoption services in the Black Country.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is inadequate - notice of action to improve.

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 who is also the agency decision maker, two Independent Reviewing Officers 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.

Surveys were returned by seven adopters and two birth family members.

### Improvements since the last inspection

Medicals are now fully incorporated into assessments of prospective adopters and copies of their medical reports are held on their file.

There has been an improvement in the standard and quality of information provided for prospective adopters. This includes an improvement in the leaflet information that explains the process about matches and linking. It makes it clear that adopters are welcomed from a wide range of people.

The disclosure number relating to Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks is now included on the memo on adopter's files. This also needs to state the level of check undertaken to provide a full record.

There has been an increase in staffing level in the adoption team.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is not judged.

### **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is inadequate.

Wolverhampton's adoption service use the effective recruitment system as part of their membership of the Adoption in the Black Country (ABC) group of local authorities. This makes efficient use of time and shares the resource of adopters across the four local authorities. Wolverhampton also support this activity through their own recruitment officer, although this role is focused more on fostering but ensures the adoption service communicates effectively with the ABC recruitment officer.

Following the Information evening run by ABC those who remain interested in adoption are visited at home by a member of the adoption team. Applications are received from prospective adopters who are then invited to preparation courses. Preparation training is also shared with the ABC partners. Each authority provides two courses a year and they take prospective adopters from across the Black Country. This allows applicants the choice of time, venue and type of course (whether daytime, evenings or weekends). There is clear communication about the training and about individual applicants.

Assessments are undertaken by members of the adoption team and by sessional workers with experience in this field. The assessments seen were variable in quality. Some were full and informative with clear analysis, others were over reliant on the adopter's own narrative and had very little analysis by the worker or use of a professional perspective. The use of competencies differed between the assessments seen. Some assessments made use of competencies to support the evidence of their report but this was not consistent. Appropriate checks and references were sought in relation to the applicants, but the level of Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check must be recorded on the memo stating the outcome of the check. Health and Safety checks are undertaken and include guns. Consideration should be given to the inclusion of other weapons, including ceremonial knives on the checklist.

There are positive comments from approved adopters relating to the sensitivity of assessing workers. One comment from a survey received stated 'once my worker began my home study it was done efficiently and very quickly. My worker was

excellent. Made the process stress free and enjoyable.' Even when adopters experienced delays in the process of assessment they were positive about the approach of their assessing worker.

Similarly adopters felt well prepared for the adoption panel, if they choose to attend. A new information booklet gives brief information about each panel member and describes the process. A returned survey stated panel was 'daunting' but they were made welcome. The panel was 'v friendly, put me at my ease'. Not all social workers have a positive view and experience of panel. A complaint received had been given thoughtful consideration by the panel. The panel observed operated well. Members are well prepared and make a full contribution to discussions. There is a need to be clear about what happens when a member 'declares an interest' in a matter presented. Guidance in 'Effective Panels' suggests that they leave the room. Whatever is decided should be clearly stated and recorded. There is a need to ensure that children who are part of a sibling group are given full consideration of their individual needs and that this is separately recorded for each of them. The organisation of the agenda should ensure that sufficient time is given for more complex matters. The panel minutes are a full and thorough record of the meetings. There is no evidence of emergency panels taking place, although managers reported that there have been some. Staff commented that there were occasions when matters were 'squeezed' onto the agenda and less urgent matters were moved off.

There is evidence of appraisal of panel members and of their observation of panel prior to starting. The role of panel adviser is currently held by the adoption team manager. This creates a conflict of interest in relation to matters presented by the adoption team and to matches where the team manager has chaired the matching meeting. It also diminishes the quality assurance aspect of this role. Currently any changes directed by the panel to reports presented are monitored by the worker's team manager, who has already signed-off the report to send it to panel.

The agency decision maker gives full and serious consideration to adoption matters. Decisions are made with the full information available and within seven days of the panel. The letters of notification are sent in the name of the adoption team manager and consideration could be given to these going in the name of the decision maker to reinforce recent work clarifying the role.

Some adopters felt they had full information about children placed with them. Others were not confident that this was the case. Reference was made by some to the delay in receiving their child's 'later in life letter' and they felt that they were therefore working with limited information in talking with their child about their background. There are useful links with the ABC to find appropriate placements for children. There have been 'Meet the Children' evenings, which provide information about children needing adoptive families and allow approved adopters to meet workers and pass on details, which may lead to links. There are 36 children waiting to be placed for adoption. Some of these the manager believes are waiting to have review reports presented to panel to recommend changes from their adoption plan. Social workers said there was a delay in being able to arrange matching meetings, although the adoption team manager felt this situation had improved. There remains a delay in

the process of matching and placing children for adoption.

The nominated manager has appropriate CRB checks in place. This was not the case for all staff and two panel members did not have current CRB checks with a further two who did not have evidence on their file of the checks being taken.

There is a safeguarding procedure in place for children placed for adoption. However, the title of this procedure is for situations where the 'approved adopter/s have caused a child harm'. This should be broadened to include anyone who may have abused a child placed for adoption. Information seen indicated that procedures were not followed in relation to two children placed for adoption where a series of safeguarding issues have arisen. The manager stated that concerns have been raised about this case and the agency is reviewing the matter.

### **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is satisfactory.

There are positive reports from adopters about the support they receive from their individual workers. Adopters also felt able to contact other members of the adoption team and were confident of receiving support. There is one post within the team with the specific focus of adoption support and this will now be a vacancy. The post adoption support was highly valued by some adopters and reference was made to the support groups and newsletter.

Adopter's experience of receiving financial support was mixed. Comments were received that the system is unclear and there is an example of adopters waiting four months for a decision, which was changed within two weeks of it being made. Others talked of the anxiety caused by not knowing the financial support available. The manager described changes in the system, which had led to some uncertainty. There are also examples of effective and flexible use of financial support in maintaining placements for children.

The medical adviser has a clear role and protocol. Medicals relating to prospective adopters are held on their files. Adopters and workers valued the consultations with the medical adviser.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is satisfactory.

There is evidence that some birth parents are involved in their children's plans for adoption. There are Child Placement Reports (CPR) that have birth parent's views and signatures. Other CPRs had no information from parents and no explanation about its absence.

There is a variety also in the way that a child's early life experience and heritage is captured for the future. One file seen had a letter written by the birth mother and a

CD from her. Of the four files seen only two had 'later in life letters' in place. There was reference in the adopter's surveys of these letters being delayed and adopters felt this made keeping the child's heritage alive more difficult. Similarly it was recognised that 'life journey books' were often slow in being completed, for example, a year after placement. Life appreciation days do not take place, but meetings are arranged separately with adopters and those who had had relationships with their children.

Indirect contact is arranged through a letterbox exchange run by one social worker, with limited administrative support. There are not clear agreements in place in relation to all the exchanges. A birth parent of a recently placed child had no copy of the agreement and did not know when the exchanges were due to happen. Another example showed the agreement was sent recorded delivery. The system was reported to ensure that the agreement is written at the time the plan of introductions is made, which will consider a direct meeting between the adopters and birth parents. These meetings do take place and were valued by those involved. The letterbox system is under strain with a three month backlog of exchanges waiting to be processed.

There is a service level agreement in place with Adoption Support, which is an independent adoption agency providing support to birth families. There are leaflets available to social workers to give to birth families allowing them the opportunity to contact Adoption Support for counselling and support.

It is clear from adopter's comments that they value children's early heritage and that they see it as significant in the development and progress of their children.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is inadequate.

There is a statement of purpose in place, which complies with the regulations and has been ratified by the council. The children's guides in place are the same as during the previous inspection. They are not very child friendly and are both only suitable for children able to read well. The information provided for prospective adopters is useful, well presented and informative.

The nominated manager is suitably skilled, experienced and knowledgeable. The management of the service demonstrated clarity about roles and responsibilities of staff and managers, with some systems to allow cover in terms of absence. There were delays at various stages in the adoption process for both adopters and children. Prospective adopter assessments are delayed prior to allocation up to six months.



Two of the four adopters case tracked had delayed starts to their assessments, both offering valued resources of a sibling group and black adopter. Delay is evident in placing children. A relinquished baby born in January 2006 was not taken to matching panel until February 2007 and a third sibling was placed with the older siblings at 14 months with a Placement Order not being sought until the baby was over a year old. There are delays with the post adoption contact exchange, with decisions about financial support, changes to expected panel dates and with non-agency adoption work, which takes a year to allocate. Systems are not effective in prioritising where work should be undertaken most speedily, as in the examples above.

For social workers there is regular and valued supervision. Due to staffing difficulties in middle management this has not been available to all managers. Staff were committed to their work and to Wolverhampton as an employer. However, there is a sense of some demoralisation and concern from staff about the reorganisation of childcare work, which leads to work transferring at the point of a Placement Order being made. This means a change of social worker for the child at the point when probably everything else also changes [carers, contact, home and school] making it difficult for a new worker to assess the impact of these changes on a child they are also just getting to know.

Training is valued and seen as accessible by all the staff. Areas of specialism are recognised and appropriate training provided. One worker said, 'everything I've asked to go on I've done'. Staff in the adoption team had not all had recent safeguarding training.

The files seen were well-organised and structured. The adoption records for children did not have all the documentation identified in the regulations in place. At the point of archive the adoption team take responsibility to ensure the files are correct.

Complaints and allegations relating to children placed for adoption were not collated in line with regulations. There is evidence that adopters who have made a complaint have not had a formal response and are unclear about the outcome of the matters raised.

Personnel files were well-organised and all recent files have telephone verification of references. There is a problem with the system for renewal of CRB checks, resulting in some being out of date and one file having no evidence of a check being taken. The panel member's files did not have all the information required in The Adoption Agency Regulations 2005 schedules.

The premises are adequate for the purposes of the service. The space available is limited and there is currently no option for any expansion. Staff are able to book more appropriate rooms elsewhere when necessary.

Staff at different levels in the service raised concerns about the difficulty experienced with the courts locally. The courts are not prepared to grant Placement Orders until an adoptive family has been identified. This is identified as causing delays for

children as some adopters who have been linked have withdrawn at this stage in favour of other children where an order is in place. Senior managers were aware of this situation and saw it as resolved through liaison with the courts. Others, including managers, saw the situation as unchanged and still problematic. There is a new court liaison post developed, which may be able to address this issue and prevent further delay for children in the area.

## 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
4	must ensure that enhanced criminal records checks are taken and recorded in relation to all prospective adopters [The Adoption Agency Regulations 2005,Reg 23]	28/09/2007
1	ensure the safeguarding procedures include anyone who may have abused a child placed for adoption [National Minimum Standard 32] [The Local Authority Adoption Services Regulations 2003 arrangements for the protection of children]	30/11/2007
16	ensure that complaints are managed and recorded in compliance with Regulation 17 [The Local Authority Adoption Services Regulations 2003]	31/10/2007
28	ensure that panel members' files record the information specified in schedules 3 and 4 [The Adoption Agency Regulations 2005, Reg 11]	30/11/2007

### Recommendations

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

- ensure that children for whom adoption is the plan are matched and placed without unnecessary delay [National Minimum Standard 2]
- ensure that assessment reports for prospective adopters analyses the information provided and makes effective use of the applicant's competencies and strengths [National Minimum Standard 4]
- consider the addition of ceremonial weapons to the health and safety check list [National Minimum Standard 4]
- ensure the organisation of the adoption panel agenda allows sufficient time for appropriate consideration of complex matters and that emergency panels are

called when necessary rather than having too full an agenda or removing items for a later panel. Consideration should be given to letters of notification going in the name of the agency decision maker [National Minimum Standard 12]

- consider effective methods of monitoring changes needed to reports presented to panel [National Minimum Standard 10]
- amend the safeguarding procedure broadening it to include anyone who may have abused a child placed for adoption. [ National Minimum Standard 32]
- consider the creation of an independent panel adviser who can strengthen the quality assurance of work presented to the panel [National Minimum Standard 21]
- ensure that the life journey work is undertaken with children and that appropriate books and letters are produced in a timely way to support children's understanding and value of their heritage. Consideration should be given to the development of life appreciation days [National Minimum Standard 8]
- ensure consistent recording of birth parent's views of the adoption plan for their child/ren [National Minimum Standard 7]
- ensure an effective and consistently good system for the exchange of post adoption information between birth families and children [National Minimum Standard 8]
- develop a children's guide, which is appropriate for children with varying skills and abilities [National Minimum Standard 1]
- ensure the effective and efficient operation of the adoption service and child care practice to avoid delays for children and prioritises work effectively [National Minimum Standard 16]
- consider the effect on children of the transfer of case responsibility at the point the Placement Order is made [National Minimum Standard 16]
- ensure adoption social workers have regular refresher courses in child protection and safeguarding [National Minimum Standard 23]