

Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Vivien Slyfield / Rosemary Chapman
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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 Metropolitan Borough of Walsall is situated in the West Midlands. It is one of the four Black Country local authorities, the other Black Country authorities being Wolverhampton, Sandwell and Dudley. These authorities have developed a joint approach to adoption entitled the "Adoption in the Black Country " project, which was set up in November 2002. They work together on recruitment and training of prospective adopters.

The adoption service provides domestic and inter country adoption services. It recruits, assesses, trains, prepares and supports prospective adoptive parents to meet the needs of babies, children and young people with an adoption plan.

The service provides counselling for adopted adults and counselling for those who are considering placing their baby for adoption.

An independent service to birth parents is provided in collaboration with Adoption Support which is a local agency that provides support to all parties whose lives have been touched by adoption.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This report is based on an announced inspection of the service which incorporated the following; a self assessment and dataset provided by the Adoption Service, four days spent by two inspectors with the service during which staff were interviewed including; the managers, the Adoption Support Service Adviser, the agency decision maker, an Independent Reviewing Officer, three adopters and two birth parents. On an additional day the lead inspector observed the adoption panel and interviewed the Chair. All the National Minimum Standards were considered and commented on.

There are no National Minimum Standards matched to the outcomes of Being Healthy and Economic Wellbeing. Seven questionnaires were returned from adopters and one from birth families.

The service had made some progress since the last inspection. The restructuring of the provision of child care services has allowed for a more comprehensive approach to the placement of children. The work of assessment and support of adopters continues to work well. Adopters viewed the work of the agency very positively.

The separation of adoption support staff and those involved in letter box exchanges and contact is a cause for concern. There are areas of development needed within the panel system and for the allocation of roles within the service. The lack of current CRB checks in place on some personnel files confirms the need a robust renewal system. There is a need to ensure appropriate employment checks are undertaken in relation to use of specialist staff.

Improvements since the last inspection

The restructuring of the provision of child care services has developed a comprehensive approach to the placement of children and allows the worker to support a child through the changes of placement to the adoption order.

The service has exceeded its target in placing children for adoption.

The files are well ordered and structured. The adoption team manager has devised a sheet to accompany a child's adoption file , which gives very clear and explicit guidance for workers.

Although further work is planned by the provider, there has been a significant amount of work undertaken to support children's social workers in understanding the purpose of child permanence reports [CPRs]. Some reports demonstrate progress.

Birth parents are formally told about the availability of independent support at a number of crucial stages in the adoption process.

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.

Recruitment is effectively undertaken and Walsall is an active member of the Adoption in the Black Country consortium [ABC]. This allows suitable and appropriate applicants to come forward and Walsall's own customer service post, which operates jointly with the fostering service from Freer Street, works well with the project. Communication is effective and applicants are directed to the most appropriate authority within the consortium. Walsall approves few adopters within the Borough due to the close geographical nature of the area.

The preparation groups are also run jointly with ABC. This allows access to a group virtually every other month. There are regular meetings between the group leaders and information is passed on about applicants to the assessing worker. There is clarity that the group is part of the assessment. Adopters commented that the preparation groups were useful. The process followed currently takes applications from prospective adopters after the preparation course, which does not follow Government guidance.

The assessments are full and well ordered. There is a well developed section on competencies and a comprehensive health and safety checklist. Appropriate

references are in place, including from employers. There are some inconsistencies in seeking references from previous partners, who can provide relevant information, even if there are no children involved. Second opinion visits are used when appropriate. Adopters commented on the knowledge and sensitivity of staff. A questionnaire commented 'good training and excellent home study'.

The panels take place on a regular, timely basis. There are no delays waiting for slots on panel. The panel system is well and ably supported by the panel administrator, who works well with placing social workers, adoption team workers and panel members. Social workers see her as 'helpful and understanding'. They also state that the panel has improved. They now feel questions are appropriate and that all members have read their papers. Adopters are welcomed to panel, although it is clear they are not obliged to attend. Adopters found panel 'daunting', but were well prepared by their worker and saw it as a positive experience. The panel observed showed members well prepared and informed and effectively chaired. There are occasions when sensitive questions are asked within the panel. This is not always done in such a way as to allow such issues to be addressed in a situation of privacy. There is no opportunity given for private feedback of recommendations if preferred to them being given within the panel meeting. The process does not make a clear distinction between the needs of each sibling, when considering family groups. At present the minutes reflect joint consideration and minutes of siblings are joint. Similarly the reasons for recommendations are not specific to the individual matter being considered. There is an example of a panel meeting when it was inquorate. The meeting continued and was minuted, with the matters and the minutes being considered by a quorate panel at a later date. The position of the Nominated Manager as a panel member is not appropriate as the regulations specify that the panel is 'independent' of the agency. Also the panel adviser post is taken by the adoption team manager, who manages work being presented and therefore has a conflict of interest in this role.

The agency decision is made well within the timescales and there were examples of it being made the same day as panel if necessary. The decision maker has the full panel minutes and all the papers presented to panel. There is a lack of clarity about who deputises in the absence of the decision maker. It cannot be the nominated manager, as they are currently a panel member. Similarly there needs to be greater clarity about who the decision maker can consult with, if this is needed.

Matching of children and adopters is given due weight. The communication between the children's workers and managers and the adoption team staff allows early information to be passed on of the possible need for placements. Following formal referral there is full exchange of information. Adopters stated they had all the information they needed to make informed decisions about children. One questionnaire stated that the information on the child was 'extensive.' The placing social workers commented that the adoption team were 'experience, responsive and helpful'. They work together on finding suitable placements and found the adoption team very supportive. A comment from them was 'They get things moving for children'.

The Nominated Manager has appropriate checks in place in relation to safe employment. It is noted that the relevant Criminal Record Bureau [CRB] check expires in 12 days time and that although a new one has been requested it is not yet in place. There are issues of concern about the appointment process, with records showing a senior member of staff starting before the appropriate CRB check was in place. The renewal system for CRBs is not robust. There is too little time allowed between requesting the check and the expiry date of the previous check. Managers stated that a new system was being implemented but that there was a backlog of work to be cleared.

The panel members' files did not include the required information and would benefit from a front sheet to collate some of this. These files should also provide evidence of CRB checks undertaken by other departments in the authority. There is a need to ensure that specialist workers for the adoption service are either registered in their own right or employed by the adoption service, having undertaken the relevant employment checks.

There is a safeguarding policy in place for adopters. This does not focus on children placed for adoption to ensure all possible situations are addressed.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is satisfactory.

On an individual level there is support for adopters and their families. Adopters comment positively about the support from the adoption team. A questionnaire states the adoption team 'explain everything - even if they don't know the answers they'll find them.' Another says 'We have found the agency to be helpful, it could not do more'.

There is effective use of specialist services including the medical and legal advisers. There is use of the Children and Mental Health Service [CAMHS] and some specific and positive work from a psychotherapist. A group of professionals and adopters meets under the title of Excellence in Adoption. There is a newsletter, a buddy scheme and support groups for adopters.

While families are supported there is a lack of strategic overview and a sense of driving the adoption support forward. There are structural issues relating to this, which are addressed under 'Organisation'. Senior managers commented that a current review of CAMHS will be used to assist development and progress.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

There was a variation in response from birth parents about how they see the service. Some feel well informed throughout, other state they lacked information and are unclear about what was happening. They are informed about the independent

support offered through adoption support at a number of key points in the process. Managers state that this service is not fully utilised and are keen to look at its development.

Birth families views and feelings are recorded on the CPR. These are of variable quality. Work has been undertaken in providing briefing workshops for children's social workers by the adoption team manager to improve the quality of the reports. There is some reported progress. There is now a system for reports noted by panel as needing improvement or amendments being re-submitted to the following panel.

There is a commitment to and understanding of the importance of birth families contributions. This is reflected in the use of 'treasure boxes' to store early memorabilia for children and in efforts to ensure that life story work is completed. This work is usually undertaken by staff in the outreach team. Some children's social workers are sometimes able to undertake this work themselves, but others did not have sufficient time. Social workers report the quality of life story books was variable. This related to workers seeing some work as lacking a personal relationship with the child.

Life appreciation days, or the equivalent, are well established. These are used effectively to convey information directly from those involved in a child's early experiences to their adopters.

A letter box exchange system is in place to provide for indirect contact between adopted children and their birth families. All the exchanges are copied. There is no reminder system, as this was tried and felt not to work well. If a planned exchange fails to take place this is not followed up unless there is a complaint from one of the parties. The whole system is run by one social worker with support from an unqualified worker but no administrative support.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

There is a full statement of purpose in place, which needs a minor alteration of the name of the regulating authority. The children's guides have not progressed since the last inspection. The one for more able children is compliant, although the younger children's does not include information about complaints, advocacy or the Children's Rights Director. These have not yet been developed into a useful tool for working with children.

The written information for prospective adopters is well presented, clear and

informative. An adopters questionnaire states it is, 'useful pertinent and timely'. It is effective in conveying the information needed at this stage.

The nominated manager has the appropriate skills, qualifications and knowledge to manage. Staff commented on the approachability of the nominated manager. On an individual basis staff are managed well. Supervision is planned, useful and usually monthly. Administrative staff are also supervised and very much valued by the social workers. The administrative workers for the adoption team felt part of the team. There is however, a concern that the structure of the adoption service is fragmented with adoption support and the letter box being placed outside the adoption team, leaving them too separate and distinct. There are meetings established to link staff from these different teams but there are examples of the service not being viewed as a 'whole'. The cross-fertilization of ideas and information that should inform the development of practice is currently reduced.

There are some issues relating to the positioning of certain roles within the service. Reference has already been made to those of the nominated manager and the panel adviser in relation to the panel. The role of Adoption Support Service Adviser [ASSA] rests with the senior manager who is also the agency decision maker. The ASSA does not currently effectively influence at a strategic level and have current information about the direct adoption support work with children and families.

There are sufficient skilled and experienced staff in the adoption service. There is a range of experienced and skilled staff as well as new staff and new approaches. Students, are welcomed by the team. The workers in the adoption team greatly value the support and knowledge they provide and receive from each other. Evidence from adopters is that this is used in creating effective support to adopters. Adopters comment that the adoption team are 'excellent' and 'a fantastic team'.

As an employer Walsall is viewed positively. Some workers are able to compare their experience in Walsall with colleagues, or their own experiences from other organisations and Walsall is seen favourably. Workers talk of good personal support from managers and of management of caseloads and difficult cases. They are very positive about training. All staff see this as good. Children's social workers have been well prepared for the Adoption and Children and Act and are appreciative of the pack provided by the adoption team. Staff are supported in undertaking post qualifying training. Members of the adoption team also have access to useful and appropriate specialist training as well as regular refresher courses in safeguarding.

The councillor seen during the inspection is well informed and aware of corporate parenting responsibilities. The council receives an annual report on the adoption service, but this does take place at least every six months as recommended in National Minimum Standards.

The records kept on adopters are well ordered and current. Children's adoption files are well structure with clear expectations of what should be included at the point of archiving. The adoption team manager has provided an explicit checklist of what to include on a child's file. Files seen included evidence of the manager's decisions and

of recent audit activity.

The compilation of complaints made in relation to the service does not comply with regulation 17 and National Minimum Standard 27 in recording the details, action and outcome of complaints.

The premises are suitable and appropriate for the current staff in the adoption team. Access is gained through a code controlled door and all internal rooms with files are lockable. The archive facility is the same as at the last inspection when it complied with regulations and standards. There is a business continuity plan in place to deal with situations of emergency.

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 panel only meets when properly constituted, that it is independent of the service and therefore that the Nominated Manager does not continue as a panel member [Adoption Agency Regs 2005 reg 3]	31/01/2008
19	ensure that CRB checks are in place before staff start work and that there is an effective system in place for the renewal of these checks and that records kept in relation to panel members comply with these regulations [LA Adopt Service Regs 2003 Schedules 3 and 4]	31/01/2008
18	ensure that employment checks are undertaken in relation to the work of an independent psychologist [Adoption Support Agencies and Adoption Agencies Regs 2005 reg. 19]	31/01/2008
27	ensure that the recording of complaints complies with National Minimum Standard 27 and Reg 17 of LAA Regs 2003	31/03/2008

Recommendations

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

- ensure applications from prospective adopters are taken before attendance at the preparation groups [National Minimum Standard 4]
- ensure that adopters are involved in a comprehensive assessment including

- seeking references from all previous partners [National Minimum Standard 4]
- ensure that panel members have an opportunity to ask sensitive questions of applicants and provide feedback on recommendations in appropriate privacy; panel minutes should reflect clear separate consideration of the needs of each sibling in a family and give reasons for the recommendation in relation to each individual [National Minimum Standard 10]
 - ensure there is clarity about who deputise for the agency decision maker and who is available for consultation, should the need arise, about matters presented to panel [National Mimimum Standard 13]
 - review the safeguarding policy for children placed for adoption to ensure it complies with Reg 9 of the A C Act 2002 and focuses on children placed for adoption [National Minimum Standard 32]
 - enable birth parents and families to contribute to the maintenance of their child's heritage through the development and support of the letter box contact exchange; reconsider the use of reminders and follow-up of anticipated contacts which are not received [National Minimum Standard 8.1]
 - ensure both the children's guides are compliant with the Standards and develop the guides into tools for direct work with children [National Minimum Standard 1]
 - consider the roles and positions within the service of the adoption support service adviser and the panel adviser [National Minimum Standard 20]
 - undertake reports to the council on the progress of the adoption service at least every six months [National Minimum Standard 17.3]