

Wolverhampton City Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Vivien Slyfield
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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 satisfactory.

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

This is an announced random inspection which focuses on the actions and recommendations made at the inspection in August 2007, which rated the service as inadequate. There have been improvements in a number of areas since the last inspection. There are clear systems and procedures in place to support the service. The adoption service is now fully staffed and the wait for prospective adopters for assessment has been greatly reduced. There is a clearer understanding of the needs of the children waiting for adoptive families and priority given to families who meet these needs. There remain areas in need of further work. The adoption service has improved its response to children waiting for adoptive families, but there remain delays in identifying children who are suitable to be placed for adoption. Preparation of children for adoption and life journey work is not consistently timely and well supported. Monitoring changes needed to reports and some areas of training needs strengthening. The tenure of office of panel members must comply with the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005.

Improvements since the last inspection

The four actions made at the last inspection have been addressed. The prospective adoption records seen showed clear recording of Criminal Records Bureau (CRB)

checks and references. The safeguarding procedures have been amended to include children placed for adoption. The record of complaints is compliant with regulations and the panel members' files are greatly improved.

Of the 14 recommendations made, 7 have been addressed. The assessments of prospective adopters have improved and benefited from appropriate training for assessing workers and this work is more clearly prioritised. Ceremonial weapons are now included in the health and safety checklist. Changes have been made to allow sufficient time for complex adoption panel agenda items and provision is now made for emergency panels. The letters of notification following the agency's decision are now signed by the decision maker. The recording of birth parents' views as part of children's plans has improved. There is a more consistent and robust approach to the exchange of post adoption information. There is a much improved children's guide but it does not yet contain all the appropriate information.

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.

The system for seeking and recording CRB checks in relation to prospective adopters is now strong. There is a clear memo which records the level of disclosure, the disclosure number and date it was provided. The team manager reported the establishment of a robust system of renewal for staff CRB checks and confirms all staff have current CRB checks in place.

There is evidence of reduced delays in placing some children for adoption. Those children who had waited periods of 18 months and three years either had complex needs or were part of a sibling group, which meant it took longer to find suitable placements for them. There is still an example of a younger sibling who was 10 months old before a decision was made that they were suitable to place for adoption. The match with the older sibling's adopters showed no delay, but there is evidence of delay in the early stages of planning for the child's future.

Work has been undertaken to improve the quality of prospective adopters' assessment reports. All the reports seen have clear evidence of CRB, local authority and employer checks. Similarly there is an expectation that contact is made with previous partners and any children parented by an applicant. Medical information is included in the assessment and the health and safety checklist now also includes ceremonial weapons. Diversity is included in all the reports, although the thoroughness is varied. There is evidence that assessing social workers have undertaken training on competency-based assessments and that training is planned on 'analytical writing skills for fostering and adoption social workers'.

The adoption panel was not observed but the team manager reported that the organisation of the panel business now allows sufficient time for appropriate consideration of complex matters. Dates are set for emergency panels, which are used when necessary rather than having too full an agenda or removing items for a later panel and there is a protocol in place to arrange for additional panels if necessary. The panel members' files showed that two members have exceeded their tenure of office and should have retired from the panel in December 2008. The panel minutes showed that the panels since December 2008 remain quorate without these members. The team manager is now taking action in relation to this.

The letters of notification from the agency decision maker are now sent in his own name and are signed by the decision maker himself.

The panel minutes showed that panel raises issues of quality in relation to the work and reports presented. There are clear guidelines about the information required for Child Permanence Reports and Prospective Adopter Reports. However, there is no system in place, other than the team manager for the child's social worker, for checking that alterations recommended by the panel are appropriately made to reports. The adoption team manager remains the panel adviser, a role which she fulfils in addition to the management of the adoption service. In the current roles there is insufficient capacity to monitor changes to the reports more closely and strengthen the quality assurance aspect of this position.

The safeguarding procedures have been altered and now provide a comprehensive procedure for children placed for adoption.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is not judged.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

There is a clear policy statement that supports the significance of life story or life journey work. This states that a life story book should be completed by the first review. Minutes of statutory reviews demonstrate that this work is on the review agenda and there is an expectation that the work is completed. There is evidence from one of the complaints seen that this work had not been completed and that in another situation the match did not proceed because the child had not been prepared. There is an exchange of information between those who have early experience of a child and the adopters, but this is not coordinated into a system of 'life appreciation days'. Training is planned for four social workers to attend training in 'life appreciation days' in April this year.

The recording of birth parents' views is now in place on the files seen. The team manager states that reports consistently address this issue and identify why it has not been possible to include birth parents' views if that is the case. Adoption panel minutes show that panel raises this issue with social workers and provides advice about possible ways of gaining parents' contributions.

The system for the exchange of post adoption information has been improved. There is now one social worker who takes responsibility for the exchange and is supported by a dedicated administrative worker. The exchange system now has continuity and consistency.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

Action has been taken by the manager to address the issues raised in the last inspection. The recording of complaints is now compliant with Regulation 17. The collation of the complaints showed that issues are taken seriously and the manager uses the issues raised to make changes to improve the service, including identifying themes that need further action. The organisation of the service and the fact that it is now fully staffed has led to a reduced wait for the allocation of assessments of prospective adopters. The statistics show that there has been gradual progress in this as staffing numbers improved.

There is evidence that training has been provided for staff in the development of appropriate skills in their work for the service. There remains a difficulty for the team manager in obtaining relevant safeguarding training for adoption social workers. They have access to the 'in-house' safeguarding training but this does not address their particular focus. There is evidence of the manager's work in trying to secure the training needed but staff currently do not have a planned programme of safeguarding training. The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory.

The panel members' files are very well structured and contain the relevant information. None of the files showed telephone verification of references for panel members, but they are otherwise comprehensive.

Work has been undertaken on the children's guide. It is very much more child-friendly and is a bright accessible booklet. However, it does not include summaries of the Statement of Purpose, the process of adoption, the complaints process and the regional contact information for Ofsted.

The previous inspection raised concerns about the point of transfer between

children's social workers of children being placed for adoption. A protocol is in place that makes clear when cases should transfer. It remains a concern that this may coincide with matching a child with adopters or moving them to a family. One of the complaints received by the adoption service highlighted concerns about this issue. The team manager reports that it is possible for the social worker to continue to work with a child if the time is not right to transfer the case. This is not clear in the written protocol and it remains a concern that there is a planned change of social worker at a significant time for vulnerable children.

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 the adoption panel is properly constituted with members only serving their full tenure of office as specified in regulation 4 of The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 (National Minimum Standard 11)	29/05/2009

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]
- consider effective methods of monitoring changes needed to reports presented to adoption panel [National Minimum Standard 10]
- 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 telephone enquires are made to each referee to verify the written reference (National Minimum Standard 19)
- 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]
- finalise the children's guide to ensure it complies with schedule 2 of LAA regs 2003 [National Minimum Standard 1]
- ensure adoption social workers have regular courses in child protection and

- safeguarding [National Minimum Standard 23]
- consider the effect on children of the transfer of case responsibility at a point when detailed knowledge of the child is crucial [National Minimum Standard 16]