

Walsall Metropolitan Borough 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 Metropolitan Borough of Walsall is situated in the West Midlands. It is one of the four Black Country local authorities, the others being Wolverhampton, Sandwell and Dudley. These authorities have developed a joint approach to adoption entitled the 'Adoption in the Black Country' (ABC) consortium, which was set up in November 2002. They work together on recruitment and training of prospective adopters and jointly fund the post of the marketing and recruitment officer.

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 undertakes assessment of step-parent adoptions. An independent service to birth parents is provided in collaboration with a local agency that provides support to all parties whose lives have been touched by adoption.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The service has effective systems in place to recruit suitable staff and robust and thorough procedures for assessing adoptive families. It is good at family finding and matching children and works well with consortium members in doing this. The panel processes are well organised, professional and thoughtful.

The service provides support to adoptive families and is thorough in the assessment and provision of support to meet a range of identified needs. It has a long term commitment to supporting families and children who have been adopted.

The service is committed to involving birth parents in the plans for their children, but at times struggles to get full information from birth families. There is some inconsistency in the quality of life books, child permanence reports (CPRs) and later in life letters. The indirect contact arrangements through the letterbox system are effective and assistance is provided with both direct and indirect contact. Access to independent support is provided which offers a counselling and intermediary service to adopted adults and birth relatives who wish to trace adopted children.

The agency is well managed and has a good strategic approach to the provision of adoption services. Staff are well supported and undertake relevant training. Generally there are good procedures in place, but historical abuse disclosed by adults is not clearly addressed.

This is a good service that has a clear focus on the needs of the child and on providing safe and secure adoptive families.

Improvements since the last inspection

All the actions and recommendations made at the last inspection have been met apart from two which are partially met.

Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checks are in place before staff start work and there is now a robust renewal system in place. This is reflected in the records for both staff and panel members. Independent or sessional workers have the same checks undertaken and recorded.

Applications from prospective adopters are now consistently taken before the preparation training and the comprehensive assessments now include references from previous partners and an updated health and safety check is completed.

The adoption panel now only meets when it is quorate and it is properly constituted to maintain its independence. Applicants have the opportunity to answer personal questions and to hear the panel's recommendation in private if they wish. The panel minutes state the reason for the recommendation and reflect the separate consideration of the needs of each individual in a sibling group. There is a clear procedure for deputising for the agency decision maker and for her to consult with a senior colleague if necessary in reaching a decision. The council executive is aware of developments within the service through six monthly reports.

The safeguarding procedure now clearly relates to children placed for adoption but needs further clarification about adult disclosure of historical abuse.

The post adoption workers are now part of the adoption team and based in the same accommodation. They have improved the indirect contact exchange and have a reminder system for the contacts due.

The Statement of Purpose and the children's guide have been reviewed and are now compliant with the national minimum standards and regulations. The role of the adoption support service adviser is now at an appropriate level in the service and allows for strategic development as well as an awareness of current issues. The position of panel adviser remains with the adoption team manager, which can result in conflict of interest and leaves the manager with a wide range of responsibilities.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The service has a clear and well thought out recruitment strategy and a well developed awareness of the children who are likely to need adoptive families. This is worked in conjunction with the ABC consortium who operate a joint recruitment system allowing children to be placed outside the borough but with adopters approved by their own service. The consortium jointly fund a recruitment and marketing officer who ensures the system works well and that effective communication is maintained. There are regular information evenings with staff from each of the local authorities and information is passed on and initial visits are undertaken by social workers experienced in adoption. The service has a well structured format which is used to record the initial visits and allows a decision to be made about inviting an application and seeking early references such as medicals if needed. Adopters commented that they were well received by the service and some commented they had come to this service due to the positive response they received at this early stage.

The application to be assessed as prospective adopters is taken before the invitation to the preparation training. This training is also planned and undertaken by the ABC consortium with courses running every two months and each partner authority running two courses per year. Within this service there is a named worker who liaises with colleagues undertaking the training in the partner authorities, who meet regularly to review and update the courses. Each host for the preparation course provides a report on the course content and on each attendee as well as raising any issues directly with them. Adopters find the preparation helpful. One adopter's survey stated; 'The preparation training opened our eyes and broadened our perspective on being adoptive parents.'

By the end of the course the social worker who will undertake the assessment of the prospective adopters has been allocated. All assessments begin with a written 'Prospective Adopters Agreement', which makes clear what will be involved and the expected timescales. The assessment reports are completed in the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) Prospective Adopters Report (PAR) format. The reports reflect clear, evidenced based assessments. All statutory references are undertaken including police checks for applicants or significant relatives from abroad, previous partners and employers and an updated health and safety check is completed. Views are included of children who know the applicants and at least one referee is a family member. All applicants are invited to attend the adoption panel considering their assessment if they wish and are well prepared and supported in doing so.

The adoption panel is well organised, supported by appropriate policies and procedures and there are additional panels available if more than the monthly meeting is needed. None of the social workers reported delays in being able to present matters to the panel. The meetings are well chaired and the panel members make fully informed contributions on the basis of all the information they have

received. The minutes are well structured and give a clear account of the matters discussed, with precise statements about the reasons for the recommendation and advice about matching. The agency decision maker is experienced and knowledgeable about the needs of children and adoption. She reads all the relevant information and minutes in reaching her decision, which is passed on to the relevant workers within the appropriate time scales. Documentation surrounding the decision currently inaccurately states the matter was 'ratified'. There are systems in place to allow speedy decision making if required and consultation and deputising for the decision maker if necessary.

There is a strong commitment to family finding, including those children who have specific needs and who may be harder to place. The adoption team are aware of children's needs at an early stage in the planning process. If possible the family finding social worker will attend the adoption panel that considers whether adoption is a suitable plan for the child. A permanency planning meeting is held and its minutes sent to the adoption team manager. At a co-worker's meeting the family finder draws up a profile of the child in conjunction with the child's social worker. The needs of the child are well identified and matched with the abilities of approved adopters. The service has a well established process for life appreciation days, which take place at an early stage to allow adopters to gain all the information possible before meeting the child. One adopter commented; 'we felt we had all the information (about the child), it was very, very detailed.'

The ABC also run regular 'meet the child' events, which allow prospective adopters to see information, including DVDs about children across the consortium needing adoptive families. Adopters and workers commented very positively about these events, 'bringing the child alive' and opening up a wider range of possibilities for both adopters and children.

All introductions of children to their prospective adopters are well planned and always involve a face-to-face review of how the introductions are going. Adopters provide books, photographs and DVDs to help prepare children for the move. The low disruption rate of placements is confirmation of the process working effectively.

There are rigorous and well structured systems in place to ensure that managers and staff appointed are suitable to work with children. CRB checks are in place before staff take up their posts and there is a system for renewal of these checks. The safer recruitment panel considers any issues raised through the recruitment references and checks.

The safeguarding procedures have been updated and make it clear they relate to children placed for adoption. The procedures make reference to disclosures of historical abuse but are not linked to the procedures for birth records counselling and situations where an adult may disclose this information.

There are effective systems in place to provide suitable, well prepared adopters who are well matched to meet the needs of children needing adoptive families.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

There have been significant changes to the provision of adoption support since the last inspection. The post adoption workers are now part of the adoption team and based in the same room. Staff have responded very well to this change and the closer working relationships have enhanced the practice across the team. The post adoption workers present part of the preparation training, so raising awareness of the support available and meeting some adopters from Walsall.

Adopters continue to be well supported by their assessing social worker, who makes regular contact with them after their approval. One survey from an adopter stated; 'the support from our link worker was excellent.' Adopters said they are kept informed about what is happening with possible links with children. One adopter said they are 'kept in the loop' and another that the service is; 'very, very good at keeping us informed.' All the approved adopters are given membership of Adoption UK for the first year. The service runs a buddy scheme, has an annual event for adopters and their families to meet together, holds coffee mornings and circulates a newsletter to which adopters contribute. The post adoption team links with the ABC consortium in providing a range of training for adopters including 'A Piece of Cake' and the development of Theraplay.

The post adoption staff are enthusiastic about the development of the service and work hard to maintain a service to adopters with Walsall children living away from the area. They provide a duty system but are also flexible in their approach, responding to calls outside the duty time and ensuring a response to those in need of support as soon as possible. They undertake full assessments of adoption support needs and plan and review the support provided. The team work closely with an independent psychotherapist and have a working relationship with the local child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS). Adopters commented positively about the support from these resources. The post adoption workers undertake work with schools and provide training for teachers to enhance their understanding of adoption related issues.

There is effective use of both medical and legal advisers to the service. Staff commented on their accessibility and responsiveness to issues raised.

The service supports adoptive families well to provide secure and loving homes for adopted children.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

The service is committed to providing an effective service for birth families. Children's social workers understand the life long implications of adoption and strive to include the views of birth parents in children's CPR. The transfer of work and the shortage of

children's social workers has made this more difficult. The quality of the CPRs is variable, although there is evidence of work undertaken by the adoption team manager in training and supporting children's social workers in this task. An independent service to birth parents is provided as part of an agreement through the ABC consortium with an independent adoption support service. The use of this service is low and currently under review. The present arrangement requires birth parents to choose to make contact with the service. One birth parent described this as difficult due to the conflicting emotions experienced at the time adoption becomes the plan for a child.

There is a clear understanding and commitment to maintaining each child's heritage. Memory boxes are used to collect and store information from a child's birth family and early life. Adopters value this information and ensure it is available and shared with their children. Where possible adopters meet the birth parents of their child and both adopters and birth parents are supported to do this. Work is undertaken by the post adoption workers and the outreach team to prepare children to move on and understand why they need to be adopted. As part of this work life books are created, some demonstrate good quality preparation work with children. However, some books are not created in a timely way; one adopter commented that their child had waited for over two years for their book. Similarly the later in life letters for children are of variable quality, some are appropriate for a child rather than an older young person and some are also late in being given to adopters. A survey from adopters commented; 'we still haven't had the later in life letter for our daughter or son (placed in 2005).'

The post adoption team support some on-going direct contact arrangements. They also provide an indirect contact exchange for birth families and adopted children. There is a reminder system to support these exchanges and all the information received is copied and checked. There is now some administrative support for this task but the social work input remains high.

A service is provided for birth relatives to assist them in contacting and tracing, should this be the wish of the adopted person. Procedures have been developed to support this aspect of the service and staff express a sensitive and committed approach to ensuring the welfare of all parties is promoted. Adopted adults are offered birth records counselling and enabled to trace their birth families.

The role of the adoption support service adviser (ASSA) is held by the operations manager for family placements. There is close liaison between the manager and the post adoption team to ensure a working knowledge of current issues informs the strategic development of the service.

While there is some good work in maintaining the heritage of some adopted children this is not yet consistently in place for all children and their birth families.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The Statement of Purpose is well written and has recently been reviewed and updated. Similarly the children's guide has been reviewed and is now used by the ABC consortium members. The current guide is very child friendly, suitable for differing abilities and is used as an effective tool for working with a range of children and young people. It can be provided in different languages and formats if necessary. Applicants receive good, clear written information at various stages of the process which explains what should happen next. Adopters commented that this was useful and they were clear about the children who need adoptive families.

There is strong and effective management at all levels of the service. The nominated manager, the operations manager and the adoption team manager all have appropriate skills, knowledge and experience, which they use to work together in the organisation of a well run service. Various workers comment positively on their managers, one said that the operations manager and head of service are 'really accessible, there are no barriers.' The adoption manager is seen as; 'very committed and passionate about her work', 'plain speaking and very fair.' Another member of the adoption team stated; 'the atmosphere is so good to work in because of the managers and because of the colleagues.' The strength of the management team is evident in the effective changes to the service, including the smooth transition of the post adoption workers to join the adoption team. The range of the adoption team manager's responsibility is very wide, encompassing all the adoption work, including post adoption support and the role of panel adviser, which can bring a conflict of interest. The commitment of those involved has ensured good communication is established within an effective service.

The service has an appropriate number and range of staff to enable it to run according to its Statement of Purpose. Staff demonstrate significant levels of knowledge, skill and experience in working with children and in adoption. Staff have a broad perspective of the whole adoption spectrum and use their learning from this to inform their practice. They are prepared to change and keen to develop. They make good use of their twice yearly team days. They are well supported in their work through regular supervision and appraisal and are encouraged to undertake training both in-house and through external specialist courses. All staff undertake mandatory refresher training in safeguarding. Although they are busy and under pressure, including taking on tasks outside their role to assist colleagues, they feel that Walsall is a good employer because of the support they receive. Staff express concern about the current pay issues, but remain committed to the authority.

There are sufficient administrative staff to support the work of the service, although they are also under pressure and particularly in their work with post adoption support. Social work staff commented that they were 'fantastic' and that they are all part of the team and work well together. All staff demonstrate enthusiasm and commitment to the work of the service and outcomes for children. One team member commented; 'this is the best team I've ever worked in and I've worked for a number of local authorities.'

The records are well ordered. Adopters' files and children's adoption files, which are now collated by the adoption team, are compliant with the regulations. All the files seen have a clear record of supervision decisions and of file audits, including monitoring in relation to timescales. The personnel and panel members' records are compliant with the regulations. An appropriate record is kept of all complaints and they are considered in relation to any issues to be learnt and in the development of the service.

The service is monitored by a full annual report to the council executive with interim six monthly updating reports. The lead councillor is well informed about the service and committed to the role of corporate parenting.

The premises are fit for purpose and the accommodation is suitable. The information technology systems are secure and there are good business continuity and disaster recovery plans in place.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Service provision addresses any particular needs in relation to disability, race, culture, faith or gender. Good information is available on cultural and religious needs. All prospective adopters are treated with respect and their individual needs given appropriate consideration.

This is a good service which has a clear focus on the needs of the child and is committed to the provision and support of safe, secure adoptive families.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- ensure the written procedures for dealing with allegations of historical abuse are updated to include disclosure by an adult (NMS 32.4)
- ensure that efforts are made to obtain for the child clear and appropriate information from the birth parents and birth families about themselves and life before the child's adoption, with particular reference to the consistent quality of CPRs, life books and later in life letters (NMS 8.2)
- consider the role within the service of the panel adviser. (AA Regs 2005 Reg

8)(NMS 20)