

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

Wolverhampton City Council's adoption service is based 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 a service level agreement with Adoption Support, a registered adoption support agency, to offer interdependent support for birth families whose children have adoption as a plan or who have been placed for adoption.

Post adoption support for adoptive families is provided by the team in conjunction with Adoption UK, a registered adoption support agency. The team also undertake birth records counselling and intermediary services, and give information about other agencies who can assist if the piece of work is more complex.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This announced key inspection assessed how well the agency is meeting the key national minimum standards and associated regulations for adoption agencies. It also considered the progress made in relation to the action and recommendations set at the previous inspection.

The agency provides a satisfactory service with some good aspects, both within the satisfactory outcome areas and for the enjoying and achieving outcome area as a whole. Its preparation, assessment and approval of adopters is thorough, supported by a rigorous adoption panel who provide suitable challenge. This ensures children are placed in safe families who can meet their assessed needs. Support to adoptive families is good and utilises a variety of means including direct work, financial support, support groups, 'buddying' arrangements and good access to specialist services. The manager and staff are very committed, enthusiastic, knowledgeable, experienced and keen to improve outcomes for children. Equality and diversity are promoted well and the agency is inclusive and respectful to all who use its services.

The main shortfalls include: delay in finding suitable adoptive families for children; consistency in providing child permanence reports and life journey work of good quality and in a timely manner; lack of formality and recording of sibling assessments; capacity in relation to staffing; adopters' file audits; signing of support plans; the role of panel adviser; staff training; and communication. The shortfalls have already been identified by the service, and some processes are being

implemented to address them; however, it is too early to assess their effectiveness in improving outcomes for children.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the previous inspection, one action and eight recommendations were made. The action related to the tenure of members of the adoption panel. This action has been satisfactorily addressed.

The recommendations related to: minimising delay for children; monitoring changes to reports; the role of panel adviser; telephone verification of references; life journey work with children; the children's guide; safeguarding training; and the point when children's cases are transferred. There are still considerable delays for children waiting for adoptive placements. Although systems are being implemented to address this, their impact cannot be assessed as they are very recent. The panel advisor role is still carried out by the adoption team manager, and although she does provide a quality assurance function, there are issues of independence in relation to adopters' reports and also in terms of workload. The agency is piloting child appreciation days but life journey work is not consistently undertaken, either to an appropriate standard or in a timely way. These three recommendations have therefore been repeated.

There are improved systems for monitoring the changes needed to reports presented to the adoption panel; telephone verification is made to each referee; the children's guide is a child-focused document which meets regulatory requirements; adoption social workers have undertaken safeguarding training; and systems are being implemented to improve the effect on children of the point of case transfer. These five recommendations are therefore met.

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 agency has satisfactory arrangements in place to promote the safety and well-being of children who have a plan for adoption.

Recruitment of adopters forms part of the collaborative working arrangements with the three other local authorities in the Black Country to offer consistency, convenience and choice to enquirers, applicants and adopters. A recruitment and marketing officer coordinates and evaluates the strategy, meeting regularly with the managers of the four local authorities, so that he has an up-to-date awareness of the needs of children waiting for adoptive families and can target recruitment

accordingly. He deals with initial enquiries and assists with information events to give a consistent message. Meet the children events are held and a database of local adopters and children waiting has been developed, to further improve the potential for matching. There is a very strong awareness of the needs of children with disabilities and also the need to recruit adopters from a diverse range of backgrounds and cultures.

This has not provided timely adoptive placements for Wolverhampton children. Currently there are 37 children waiting for an adoptive family, some of whom have been waiting a long time. There are systemic failures which mean that children are not referred to the adoption team until they have a formal decision that they should be placed for adoption. This causes delay in family finding and subsequent placement. Senior managers are aware of this shortfall and have an improvement plan to address the issues, which is regularly monitored. However, the success of this could not be assessed due to its very recent implementation.

There is a good matching process with dedicated family finders who make strenuous efforts to ensure children are appropriately placed. Children's needs are comprehensively assessed, including valuable input from foster carers to inform this assessment. The attributes, characteristics, strengths and weaknesses of adoptive families are collated alongside those assessed needs in a matching matrix. Formal linking meetings chaired by a senior practitioner add further rigour to the process to ensure that children are placed with families who can meet their needs. Children's social workers undertake assessments to decide whether siblings should be placed together or separately. However, the assessments are not formalised or recorded in a way that reflects the significance of that decision.

Prospective adopters receive full information about possible children with whom they may be matched, to enable them to make an informed decision about their capacity to parent that specific child effectively. They are supported in this by good access to the medical adviser, who makes them aware of the implications of any medical issues. A further recent development is the piloting of child appreciation days to enable prospective adopters to hear a variety of information about a child's early life and current needs from a number of sources. Introductions are well planned and include a midway review to enable any doubts to be expressed before placement. These practices are supported by very clear written information for adopters.

Children are safeguarded by a thorough preparation, assessment and approval process for adoptive parents. The preparation training is another example of the collaborative working between the four authorities and provides choice of times and venues for applicants. There is universal praise for the preparation training; one adopter said: 'Preparation training was excellent and gave us an in-depth view and insight on how to prepare for adoption.' Another adopter commented: 'Preparation was thorough and really made us look at ourselves and what we could offer to a child.' Assessing social workers are sensitive and professional. Their assessments are of a reasonable standard but rely heavily on self-reporting from the applicants and vary in the degree of social work analysis. There have been some delays in applicants becoming assessed and approved as adoptive parents but this has been

addressed. However, communication was identified as an issue by some adopters, particularly at times when they were not allocated to a social worker or following their approval.

The adoption panel adds further rigour to the process. It is appropriately constituted with a good mix of members from a range of cultures and who offer a range of personal and professional experience of adoption. This is enhanced by joint training with the adoption team, for example, learning lessons from disruptions. It is well organised and efficiently administered, to ensure members receive their paperwork in good time to give it appropriate consideration. It sits regularly to prevent any delay for children. Members are well prepared and provide a good challenge to the work they scrutinise. The role of panel adviser is currently undertaken by the adoption team manager. This means that there is less independent scrutiny and quality assurance of adopter assessments as she has line managerial responsibility for them. The minutes are very thorough and clearly show the panel discussion and reasons for the recommendation. This provides a good record for an adopted person in the future. Conflicts of interest are managed very well to maintain independence and transparency.

There is well-established practice of adopters attending for their approval. More recently they are invited to attend to hear their match. They are prepared well by their social worker and with the help of an informative booklet for what is inevitably a daunting experience. One adopter commented: 'The panel were very kind and considerate.' Social workers feel the panel give them constructive criticism and also praise, which is fed back to the agency to improve practice. The decision is made in a well-considered manner, taking into account all of the information. This is conveyed in a timely way to adopters and birth parents.

The recruitment of staff is thorough; managers and social workers are properly checked to ensure they are safe and suitable people to work with children and families. They have appropriate qualifications, skills and experience to enable them to undertake their responsibilities.

Social workers demonstrate a good understanding of safeguarding issues, including those that are particularly relevant to adoptive placements, such as the use of social networking sites. They are supported by clearly written policies and procedures which are implemented in practice, and have access to safeguarding training.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency provides good support to adoptive families to enable children to enjoy and achieve in a stable environment. Adopters are well prepared for the task of adoptive parenting; this starts with the preparation training and assessment and is supplemented by further post approval training. This addresses issues such as attachment, sexual abuse, talking about adoption, and managing behaviour, all of which are very pertinent areas. A stakeholder commented about an interagency

placement: 'The couple were extremely well prepared for adoptive parenting.' Adopters are made aware of post adoption support during their preparation and this is reinforced at the formal linking meeting, when the post adoption social worker is introduced to them, where possible. This makes it easier to contact the agency in the future.

The initial adoption support plan is drawn up at the linking meeting and forms part of the paperwork considered by the adoption panel. However, it is not updated following placement, to make it a more effective working document. The manager is aware of this and is in the process of developing ways of improving those arrangements. The initial assessments for post adoption support are thorough but are not consistently signed by the adopters to indicate that they are happy with the assessment and agree with its conclusions.

One of the ways in which adopters keep in touch with the agency and are made aware of events and information is through a newsletter, which is professionally produced and informative. A recent one included advice for dealing with the heightened emotions which Christmas brings, and updated information about post adoption contact and new members of staff. Adopters are very complimentary about the support they receive: 'The support is fantastic', 'It's a real safety net' and 'I could not fault them. If it had not been for the social worker, the adoption would not have been successful.' The agency pays for membership of Adoption UK, a registered adoption support agency, for the first year following approval. This gives adopters access to a variety of services including peer advice and support, and training. The agency has a service level agreement to provide some aspects of its adoption support; this is monitored and evaluated on a regular basis to ensure it is meeting the needs of the families. Two support groups are well established in the area and there are also two social events for adoptive families; these provide adopters (and children at the social events) with effective and supportive contacts with people in similar situations.

The agency has access to a very effective medical advisor who meets with prospective adopters to ensure they have sufficient information about the health needs of children and the implications of these for the family. Legal advice is also accessible and helpful. A cultural identity group provides support for children from minority ethnic backgrounds to enable them to develop a positive self-identity. There is prompt access to the child and adolescent mental health service, including regular consultation for staff, and good links with the looked after children's education service. These services meet the diverse needs of children placed for adoption.

There are effective measures to deliver services to adopted adults and their birth relatives; this is partly undertaken by the agency and partly through a service level agreement with an adoption support agency. Service users receive a prompt, sensitive response.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency is committed to involving birth parents in the plans for their child and maintaining a child's heritage and does this to a satisfactory standard. Children's social workers demonstrate a willingness to improve their practice and are committed to providing good outcomes for the children. The child permanence reports clearly show that birth parents are involved in care planning and their wishes and views are consistently recorded, often in their own words. The child permanence reports are of a variable quality, however; this shortfall is being addressed by the adoption team manager, who is providing training to the children's teams, and also at a more senior level to improve the quality assurance aspects of the role of the children's teams' managers.

The agency has a service level agreement with an adoption support agency to provide independent support to birth parents. The take-up of the service is low and the manager is trying to address how this can be improved.

Birth parents are encouraged to contribute to the maintenance of a child's heritage through the provision of information for the life journey book. These remain of a variable quality and are not consistently provided to adoptive families in a timely way. This means that they are not able to use them as tools to help children understand their history and why they are with the adoptive family. Adopters demonstrate a very empathetic attitude towards the birth family and are encouraged to meet birth parents and share information about the family of origin with their adoptive child. Adopters comment that the preparation training plays a pivotal part in helping them understand and accept this important aspect of adoption and adoptive parenting.

The post adoption indirect contact arrangements are robust. The letterbox is very well organised, all contacts are monitored, the reminder system is proactive and letters are sent out by recorded delivery. There are also very good and clear information leaflets to explain the purpose of contact, offer assistance and give examples of appropriate letters. These arrangements contribute to the effectiveness of maintaining contact agreements for the benefit of the child's understanding in the future.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The Statement of Purpose is a clearly written document which gives good and relevant information to anyone who wishes to know what the service offers. This is underpinned by comprehensive policies and procedures to guide the work of the staff. The children's guides are written in a child-focused way, including one in a pictorial form, to enable children to have an appropriate understanding of adoption and what it means for them.

Information for enquirers, including those who wish to adopt from other countries, is very good. It is clear about the process and the children who need adoptive families, contains stories about adoption, and includes images of adopters and children from a range of backgrounds to make it inclusive. One adopter commented: 'We had lots of information and loads of help.'

The agency is managed to a satisfactory standard by people who have the necessary skills, qualifications and experience. There have been recent changes to the managerial structure which staff view as positive. Roles and responsibilities are clear, as are arrangements for delegation. Links between the teams in the children's service, scrutiny and performance management have not been as effective as they should to deliver good outcomes. This has been recognised and is being addressed by the relatively newly appointed head of service. There is an improvement plan which is regularly monitored and evaluated, and more effective links with other parts of the service which deal with looked after children. These new arrangements are too recent to see any significant improvement.

Staff demonstrate a good understanding of adoption issues, and are knowledgeable, experienced and committed. Adopters have commented: 'Staff are very professional and helpful.' Staff are well supported; they receive regular supervision, opportunities for relevant training and access to approachable and knowledgeable managers. However, children's social workers have not had recent training in life journey work or assessment of siblings to support their practice.

There are issues of capacity within the adoption service. For example, there are currently 37 children waiting for an adoptive placement yet only seven assessments of adoptive families were completed last year. Although some of the shortfall is met by purchasing interagency placements, the shortfall is considerable. Likewise, there are one and a half social workers providing adoption support to an increasing number of children who are being adopted. Although support is good, their ability to expand and develop the service is hindered by lack of capacity.

Robust challenge to the adoption service by the executive is underdeveloped; they receive regular information but this has been subsumed into the wider service for looked after children. New arrangements to give adoption a higher profile in the council are being established and implemented.

There are good administrative processes to support the work of the agency. There are appropriate records of complaints and allegations to enable effective monitoring. Files for panel members and staff personnel files contain information to demonstrate appropriate and robust recruitment. Files for children and adopters are well ordered, and they contain all the required information in an accessible format. Children's files are regularly audited but this system has yet to be implemented for adopters' files.

The premises used by the adoption agency are suitable to meet the needs of the service. They are easily identifiable, accessible, secure, and have rooms available for meetings. File storage is also secure and the arrangements for archiving are particularly robust.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The staff team reflect the wider community and demonstrate a positive attitude towards inclusivity. The agency welcomes applicants from a variety of backgrounds and all literature includes positive images of a variety of cultures, and is easy to read and understand. Children's needs are fully assessed and strenuous efforts are made to place them with appropriate families to meet those needs. Formal arrangements are in place to consider and approve transracial placements to ensure children's needs can be met by families who do not reflect their racial background. These are supported by the cultural identity team. The wishes and feelings of birth parents in relation to religion are obtained and respected as far as possible.

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 that children for whom adoption is the plan are matched and placed without unnecessary delay (NMS 2)
- ensure decisions to place brothers and sisters separately or apart are formally undertaken and recorded (NMS 2.2)
- ensure prospective adopters are kept informed of progress at all times, including the enquiry and post approval stages (NM 4.9)
- consider the creation of an independent panel adviser who can strengthen the quality assurance of work presented to the panel (NMS 11 and Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 Regulation 8(1))
- ensure service users are consulted on decisions made about their service provision and record such consultation on their individual records (NMS 33.5)
- 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 (NMS 8)
- ensure there is a good quality training programme to enhance the individual skills and knowledge of staff, with particular reference to life journey work and sibling

assessments (NMS 23.1)

- ensure there is a sufficient number of suitably qualified and experienced staff to meet the needs of the adoption agency (NMS 21.1)
- develop and implement a system to monitor the quality and adequacy of adopters' records. (NMS 27.3)