

City of Bradford MDC Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Sean White
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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 agency undertakes all statutory duties in respect of a local authority adoption service. This includes:

the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adoptive families; the placement of children for adoption; support to families after approval and during placement; post-adoption support to people who have been affected by adoption, including birth records counselling; arranges support and counselling for birth parents with an external agency.

It does not undertake the assessment of families who wish to adopt from overseas; this is arranged through a voluntary agency.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The agency is well managed by people who demonstrated a commitment to providing the best outcomes for children who have been placed for adoption. The systems in place encourage and support good practice and there are sound working relationships between the adoption service and the wider children's services that promote the safety and welfare of children. The assessments of adopters are thorough and arrangements for matching and placing children are well organised, although permanence reports are variable in quality.

It has a developing adoption support service that has been strengthened managerially and which is working towards providing more focused services to people who have been affected by adoption. Some adoption support 'packages' were noted as particularly well organised but cases are not reviewed regularly enough. Birth parent support is arranged through an external agency and whilst there have been some successful outcomes in this area, there is room for improvement. Life-story work is undertaken on all children placed for adoption, but its quality is variable and inconsistent.

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency has made considerable strides in the last three years and demonstrated a commitment to meeting standards and regulations. At the last inspection three years ago there were eight requirements and 17 recommendations, this has been improved upon considerably.

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 agency has a strong approach to meeting the needs of children placed for adoption and it is evident that there is a clear focus on safe and positive outcomes.

The agency places children for adoption who are from a range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The approach to the recruitment of adopters reflects this need and there was clear evidence of recruitment activity that is aimed at attracting people from all sectors of the community. Some very complex cases of children with a mixed heritage have had successful outcomes.

The systems in place to monitor children placed for adoption were robust and enabled recruitment activity to be clear and focused on the needs of children waiting. There is a very low disruption rate in this agency, which reflects successful matching and placements. The matching process is governed by clear guidelines and the Independent Reviewing Officers take a robust approach in ensuring permanence planning is kept on target. The agency does not, however, have a permanence planning policy.

The preparation, assessment and approval process is clearly and formally structured and most evidence points to it being thorough and rigorous. Information evenings and preparation groups are held at regular and frequent intervals and the majority of comments received from adopters were positive about the content and presentation of these. There was a significant minority of survey respondents, however, who indicated that they were unclear about the responsibilities of adoption agencies to recruit adopters to meet the needs of local children requiring placements; there were strong suggestions that approved adopters were frustrated that the agency was not actively trying to find children for them. There is clearly an issue of clarity that needs addressing. There are arrangements within the local consortium to provide preparation groups for Asian applicants who may not understand or speak English.

The assessments of applicants are, in the main, of a good standard and some are of a high standard. Forms F demonstrated, overall, the agency's thoroughness of approach and analytical detail. All necessary checks and references are sought. There has however, been considerable delay in many applicants' processes - caused by staff shortages and sickness.

The adoption panels (there are two) are independently chaired and appropriately constituted and reflect the community they serve; there have been no instances in recent times when a quorum could not be achieved. They sit at regular intervals and

are able to manage the business placed before them.

The panels are governed by up to date policies and procedures, are well managed and undertake their responsibilities with thoroughness and openness. There is full scrutiny given to the work they have to judge and their recommendations are made from a fully informed standpoint.

The panels are well administered, papers are sent out well in advance, and minutes are clear and produced in a timely way. Decision making was noted as being particularly thorough and undertaken with a conscientious and detailed approach to the scrutiny of the information provided in reports.

Staff recruitment procedures and practices are of a good standard with all required checks being made; this ensures that all managers and staff are suitable people to be involved in an adoption agency. All have appropriate qualifications and necessary (some extensive) levels of experience and skills. Social workers demonstrated skill, knowledge and understanding in adoption matters and brought a committed and conscientious approach to their work.

The authority's safeguarding procedures are clear; they include adoption placements and details in respect of disclosures of historical abuse.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The support provided to adopters after approval and during placement is of a regular and good standard. There are a range of opportunities for people to develop further their insights and knowledge through initiatives arranged by the agency, which includes training in particular areas. They also canvass adopters to determine if there is any particular training or development need that should be addressed. The team would like to offer more group training but there are limitations to the amount of time that it has to develop such initiatives.

The adoption support team is developing its services under the guidance of a recently appointed, dedicated team manager. A recent decision for the manager to dispense with the responsibility of adoption panel adviser has provided more time for her to concentrate on the support service.

The support service has an ever increasing workload and has developed a prioritising system to determine how support can be provided in the most effective way to those who need it most. There was evidence of thorough assessments being carried out and case records demonstrated the depth and regularity of work being carried out in all cases. In some instances, though, it was not clear if a formal review of the support package had been carried out. The referral pro-forma is a generic model and does not meet the needs of the service.

There was clear evidence of some very sophisticated support packages being

worked, and of some successful outcomes. Others, however, were less clear in direction and did not appear to be as well managed; this has caused 'drift' and uncertainty.

There is a good level of service provided by specialist advisors. The medical advisors are committed, knowledgeable and accessible; the access to and quality of legal advice is also of a good standard. The authority has its own psychologists for looked after children.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency has good systems in place to ensure that birth parents are encouraged to be involved in the planning for their children. The Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) are committed to ensuring birth parents are invited to attend all reviews and encourage their involvement in contributing their views.

Birth Parents are offered support and counselling through an arrangement with an adoption support agency (ASA); this is triggered by the IRO referring adoption cases to the adoption team, who then refer the birth parent to the ASA. There are some birth parents who do not access this facility and all of the survey respondents suggested that they were not aware of this arrangement.

The agency arranges for life-story work to be completed on all children placed for adoption with the aim being that all children should have a life-story book before an adoption order is made; the IRO are actively involved in monitoring this. Although there was evidence of some good life-story work being undertaken and completed, there were many instances of poor quality work being presented; some were seen to be little more than 'cut and paste' extracts from formal documents or Court reports. 'Later-life letters' were, in some instances, similar and it was clear had been written by social workers with little experience or training in this specialised area. The processes and systems for managing this area of work are confusing; it is not clear where the responsibilities lay for life-story work.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The management of the adoption continuum, overall, is of a good standard. Managers at all levels of the organisation are skilled and knowledgeable, understand their roles and responsibilities, and undertake them with a strong commitment to

best outcomes for adopted children. Recent changes to the management structure at team level has improved overall efficiency considerably. This is further enhanced by a firm commitment from the executive, which monitors the adoption service through the corporate parenting role and from regular reports from the agency.

The statement of purpose is a clearly written document that outlines well the aims and objectives of the agency; this and the underpinning policies and procedures provide a strong framework for effective management, although the lack of a formal permanency policy is something the agency needs to address.

The staff are well supported; they have regular, good quality supervision that enables operational responsibilities to be undertaken in an atmosphere of trust and commitment; allocation and workload management is fair and efficiently organised. The induction of new staff is well managed and enables them to develop their skills and knowledge in a supportive atmosphere. Training has a high priority in this agency and workers have access to a wide range of development opportunities, including specialist external courses.

The agency had been affected in recent times by staff shortages and long-term sickness; this has now been alleviated to some degree but there are still vacancies in the team. There are, nevertheless, sufficient staffing resources for the agency to fulfil its responsibilities.

The general administration of the adoption service is poorly resourced. Although it was clear that the workers in post undertook their roles and responsibilities with commitment and enthusiasm, and produced well managed outcomes, there is insufficient staff to manage the workload. Social workers have to undertake some of the administrative work because of these limits on resources.

Case files are in the process of becoming electronic. Children's files already are and plans to include adopters' files are in place. The adopters' case files, although containing all required information, are not well organised and it is difficult to locate information in them.

Staff and adoption panel members' files are, in the main, of a reasonable standard and contained most required information.

The premises are located close to Shipley town centre; they are accessible by both car and public transport and there is access for people with a disability. The resources and facilities of the service are modern and suited to the job in hand. The location of the adoption support team, in an adjacent building, however, does pose some difficulties for the teams in developing closer working relationships.

The security within the premises is good and file and archive storage suitably organised but the archives have not been subject to a full risk assessment.

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):

- produce a written permanency policy for children
- evaluate preparation training in respect of promoting the principles of adoption being focused on finding families
- review all adoption support work regularly
- make efforts to promote support services to all birth families
- develop a more consistent approach to the quality of life-story work and later-life letters
- make provision for more administrative resources
- undertake a risk assessment on archives.