

Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council 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

This is a local authority adoption agency that undertakes, or makes arrangements for, all statutory adoption work enshrined in current legislation. It recruits, prepares, assesses and approves adopters, and matches and places children with them. It provides or makes arrangements for support to be available to anyone affected by adoption. Inter-country adoption services are arranged through a voluntary agency.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced, key inspection.

The agency has a thorough and committed approach to keeping children safe. This is achieved by a rigorous and focused approach to the recruitment and assessment of adoptive families, and a considered and well coordinated approach to matching children with the most appropriate adopters. This is supported by a strong adoption panel and very experienced managers and staff.

Adopters are well supported after approval and this enables placements to be permanent and stable. The agency also makes provision for support services to be available to anyone affected by adoption, either in-house or through arrangements with a voluntary agency. Complex support packages are undertaken and positive outcomes achieved.

The agency is fully committed to working with birth parents and including them in the plans for their children's adoption; their views and wishes are taken seriously. Independent support is made available to all birth parents, either by the agency or through a voluntary organisation. Life-story books are always produced prior to a child's adoption and often earlier in their placement.

The agency is well managed at all levels and has the support and commitment of the executive. The operational and strategic management of the agency is well structured and coherent. It is underpinned by good policies and procedures, which are informed by a Statement of Purpose that is clear about the aims and objectives of the service. Managers and workers are well qualified to run the service, there is significant knowledge and understanding of adoption and a committed and skilled approach to service delivery. The agency is administered efficiently and conscientiously.

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency has made significant improvements since the last key inspection. The most significant area being in a more coherent management approach and a strengthening of the management structure and staffing establishment. There have also been great improvements in operational efficiency and practice. Following the last inspection there were five actions and 22 recommendations made. This has reduced to only four recommendations on this occasion. Specific areas of improvement are in respect of the adoption panel, policies and procedures and quality assurance of reports.

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 thorough approach to the recruitment of adopters. Although there are few Wigan children placed with Wigan adopters, because of protecting anonymity within a small geographical area, the agency works closely within the consortium to ensure sufficient families are recruited to meet the needs of children requiring placements. The agency's recruitment strategy reflects this and children are placed with the most suitable families using stringent matching practices.

The approach to preparing, assessing and approving adopters is thorough. There are preparation groups held at regular intervals throughout the year, which are structured to enable people to be fully informed about the processes and complexities of adoption, and the children who require placements. Assessments are undertaken with rigour and with a clear focus on ensuring that the right people are recommended to become adoptive parents so that children have the best possible opportunities and outcomes.

The adoption panel brings a well considered, thorough and committed approach to its work and responsibilities. It is governed by sound policies and procedures, is very well organised and administered, and undertakes its duties with children's safety and wellbeing as its paramount consideration. The panel is appropriately constituted, has an experienced and knowledgeable chairperson and is conducted in a way that encourages detailed discussion. Recommendations are made following a thorough analysis of the information available. Decisions are made in an equally determined way to ensure that children's welfare is promoted and protected. Decisions are also made in a timely way.

Although, in the main, the information provided for the panel is thorough and well presented there was some inconsistency in the quality of Child Permanence Reports

(CPR), in that some were lacking in detail and analysis.

The people managing and working in the agency are all appropriately qualified, very experienced and knowledgeable. Recruitment procedures and practices are sound and ensure that people working for the agency are suitable. Workers are able to demonstrate clear understanding of social work with children and adoption issues, including up to date knowledge of child care and adoption law, and current thinking in this field. However, the agency does not have 20% of its workers with a Post Qualifying Child Care Award.

There is a corporate, multi-agency child protection policy and procedure in place that addresses children who are looked after by the authority. It does not, however, make specific reference to children in adoptive placements, children placed for adoption in another area, children receiving adoption support or allegations of historical abuse.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency has a strong approach to supporting the families it has approved. The adopters are fully informed about the children being considered for placement with them and when the match has been agreed, careful plans are made to ensure introductions are managed well. Social workers in all teams work closely to support families where a placement is made, including assistance with preparations to apply to adopt the child. There are adopters' support groups in place and facilities for new adopters to have informal contact with more experienced families.

There are two medical advisors who share the role on the adoption panel. It was clear that both the agency and the panel benefit from sound and clear support from them as one or the other is present at most panels. Similarly, the agency has access to legal advice through the authority's legal department, which is readily available. Other specialist advice and support is accessed from appropriate sources whenever necessary.

Post adoption support is a developing aspect of the agency's in-house provision. There is clear expertise in the agency to undertake complex support work and assessments of need. Although much of the post adoption support has been carried out under contract by another agency until recently assessments have been undertaken by the agency and support packages put in place that reflect the need of the service users.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency has a clear approach to promoting adoption as a lifelong issue and that birth parents are important considerations when making plans that will affect

children throughout their lives and into adulthood. Birth parents views are sought and recorded and if there are any wishes or considerations that the birth parents have, then these are incorporated into the planning process. All birth parents given the opportunity to read the Child Permanence Report and their views on what is written about them are taken seriously.

The agency has an active approach to gathering information about children's backgrounds and a collective commitment to life-story work and direct work to prepare children for adoption. All children have a life-story book produced for them before they are adopted. Sometimes these are available when placements are made, or soon afterwards.

All birth parents are offered the support services of an independent Adoption Support Agency (ASA). There is good information provided for birth families about the process of adoption and recent changes to the law.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The organisational arrangements in the agency are robust, clear and enable users of the service to receive a well considered and efficient approach from a committed and well managed service.

The agency's operations are governed and informed by a suitably presented Statement of Purpose that is reflected in and underpinned by policies and procedures that are written in a way that provide a clear framework for the service. The children's guides are well presented, informative and interactive, and provide an appropriate, child-focused overview of what adoption is and what a child can expect.

Similarly, the information pack provided to prospective adopters and enquirers is a well considered set of documentation that enables the reader to be informed about the agency's approach. It is clear, welcoming and encouraging to people considering adopting a child.

The management structure is clearly defined and lines of accountability and communication are well established and understood throughout the agency. Managers are very experienced, qualified and carry out their responsibilities with commitment and energy. The manager of the agency demonstrated significant knowledge and understanding of adoption issues, law and practice.

The operational and strategic management of the service is guided by sound policies

and procedures. The Statement of Purpose underpins these and provides realistic and appropriate aims and objectives. Workers are well supported in undertaking their duties and responsibilities. Allocation and workload is carefully managed and duties are delegated and prioritised efficiently. Administrative support is of a very good standard, efficient and supports the work of the agency. The executive of the agency is committed and supportive and the authority supports its staff well.

The agency is fully staffed and there are sufficient workers to undertake the current range of responsibilities, although there are some 'acting-up' duties being undertaken to cover operational management responsibilities. Training is encouraged throughout the service and a range of development opportunities have been available to workers, these have included specialist training in specific areas.

The management of administration and case recording is of a good standard. Adopters' and children's case records are well maintained. They include all required information and there is an audit system in place. However, although there is a corporate filing policy in place, it does not reflect the needs of the adoption service.

The agency maintains separate records for workers and panel members. The panel members' records have many omissions and do not meet the required standard.

The premises used by the agency, although cramped and short of storage facilities, are suitable to be used for an adoption agency and they are secure.

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):

- make arrangements for 20% of staff to obtain the Post Qualifying Child Care Award. (NMS 19.8)
- include, in the child protection procedures, specific reference to adoptive placements, adoption support and historical abuse. (NMS 32)
- produce a policy on case recording for adopters and for children whose plan is for adoption. (NMS 27)
- maintain records on panel members that include all required information. (NMS 28)