

Rotherham MBC Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Setting address	Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council, Crinoline House, Effingham Square, ROTHERHAM, South Yorkshire, S65 1AW
Telephone number	01709 382 121
Email	andrea.hobson@rotherham.gov.uk
Registered person	Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council
Registered manager	Sue May
Responsible individual	Sonia Sharpe
Date of last inspection	01/03/2008

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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 Rotherham Adoption Service is part of the Children and Young People's Services of Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council (RMBC). A Service Manager is responsible for overseeing the adoption service and is also the nominated manager for the service. A team manager directly manages the adoption team. The adoption team is based in Crinoline House in the centre of Rotherham. The adoption team recruits, assesses, trains, prepares and supports prospective and approved adopters to meet the needs of children and young people with an adoption plan. The team also undertake step parent adoption work. Inter-country adoptions in the area are undertaken, through a service level agreement, by Doncaster Adoption & Family Welfare Society (DAFWS). Birth records counselling is referred under a similar agreement to After Adoption Yorkshire who also work with Rotherham in supporting birth families. There is a close working relationship between the elected members and the adoption service.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This announced inspection was undertaken by two inspectors over four days, a third inspector shadowed the inspection. During the inspection all the standards were considered and the following seen: four adopters and a birth family member, staff and managers interviewed including the Adoption Support Service Adviser, the agency decision maker and the panel chair. A selection of files were seen of adopters, children, adoption support assessments, panel members' files and personnel files. The panel was observed on an additional day. No surveys were received as part of this inspection.

There are areas of progress since the last inspection. There has been progress on the process of matching children with adopters and in the direct work undertaken with children in preparing them for adoption. Life appreciation days are firmly established and used effectively in passing on information to adopters. Managers and staff in the adoption service have been able to maintain commitment and enthusiasm despite staffing shortages and during a period of restructuring.

The most significant area for development is adoption support. This does not currently have a clear focus and the work is dispersed across an already stretched team. Adopters are not confident in receiving the support they need. It is recognised that the development of the Looked After and Adopted Children's (LAAC) team has already made some progress but is too newly established to assess its impact.

Improvements since the last inspection

Since the last inspection the following requirements have been met: There is a written procedure in place in relation to safeguarding children. Some amendments are needed to ensure a focus on children and not adopters, but there is now a procedure in place; the panel minutes are now available at the following panel.

The service has also taken steps to improve the adoption support service. This is at too early a stage to judge the effect of the creation of the LAAC team, but the evidence so far is positive.

It is also positive to note the attitude of staff towards RMBC has improved since the last inspection. Staff now see RMBC as a good and supportive employer.

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.

There is an explicit, clear recruitment strategy in place. It makes use of national statistics and provides local information about the needs of Rotherham children. RMBC approved seven adopters in the last year. The recruitment shop in Rotherham is now closed after analysis showed its use did not increase the number of either adopters or foster carers. The marketing aspect of recruitment is not currently well developed.

There is a clear process for working with applicants showing an interest in adoption. Following a referral, workers visit applicants within two to three weeks. There was some confusion in the implementation of the smoking policy established by RMBC. Records showed that advice given to applicants is not always consistent with the policy.

A comprehensive preparation course is established. Managers have supported staff by using an appropriate independent social worker to run the courses, with support from workers in the adoption team. There is evidence of delays in applicants attending preparation courses. The course runs three times per year. The course running at the time of the inspection has a couple of prospective adopters from a neighbouring authority attending. Managers and staff spoke of the intention to develop this approach to allow more access to other authorities' preparation courses. Adopters spoke positively about the course. They found it useful and informative, one described it as 'very valuable'. One couple said it had changed their attitude towards birth families.

Currently the application from prospective adopters is taken after the course. This does not follow the government guidance, which specifies applications should be taken before the preparation course. There are delays in the allocation of assessments. It is acknowledged that the team have experienced staffing difficulties over the last two years, which is relevant to these delays. Adopters said that the gap between the course and the start of the assessment makes it difficult to remember issues. The more recent assessments are more analytical of the information provided and make use of competencies. The health and safety checks undertaken do not include weapons. There is evidence that attempts are not consistently made to check with foreign police authorities when applicants have lived abroad. All the domestic references are completed, including to all employers and to all previous partners, irrespective of involvement with children. The latter references are noted as good practice, as is the continuation of a final visit and report being completed by the team manager prior to the presentation to panel.

The adoption panel meets twice per month. It is properly constituted and well organised. Additional panels are arranged if necessary. The membership is appropriate and all new members observe panel before taking up their position on panel. The position of panel advisor is currently held by the adoption team manager. This creates a conflict of interest as the same manager presents final visit reports and has line management responsibility for all the adopters presented. It is unusual to have a separate panel administrator and minute taker. While the regulations allow this, consideration should be given to increasing the number of people present at panel and the effect of this on attendees. There are clear and well constructed minutes, which give an informed view of panel business. Staff and adopters report the questions asked by panel to be appropriate. Although attending panel is daunting, an adopter commented 'they were good at putting us at ease. There was a very good atmosphere and the panel were relaxed amongst themselves, which made us more relaxed'.

All the agency decisions are made within the timescales and appropriate notifications sent. The agency decision maker will consult with the chairperson if there are issues outstanding for her. There should be no consultation with any member of the panel in the decision making. There are clear arrangements in place for deputising in the decision maker's absence.

The service has used information from complaints to improve their matching procedure. Clear information is now fed into a manager's decision meeting. This follows selection of suitable adopters being offered to the placing social workers. These workers are not put under pressure to choose Rotherham adopters. They report that matching decisions are made focused on the needs of the child. Life appreciation days are firmly established in social work practice and are used effectively to pass on information to adopters about a child's early life.

Suitable checks and references are in place in relation to the nominated manager. A safeguarding procedure is now in place but does not focus on the child placed for adoption or include how to deal with situations of historical abuse or referrals from those receiving adoption support services.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is inadequate.

This inspection came at a time of change for RMBC's adoption support service. Managers have reviewed the service they received from the Child and Mental Health Service (CHAMS) and decided to bring the service 'in house'. The Looked After and Adopted Children Team (LAAC) was established at the beginning of January this year and is not yet fully staffed. The team reported that they have established a protocol which will ensure a rapid response to referrals, within 12 hours. They will undertake adoption support assessments and be able to receive referrals directly from adopters as well as other professionals.

The evidence from this inspection reflects the difficulties the service was experiencing. The adoption support is shared across the staff in the adoption team. They hold responsibility for undertaking adoption support work alongside their recruitment, assessment, matching and court work. Adoption support assessments are not undertaken, although the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) proposed plan for adoption support is used. There is no focused direct link between those providing adoption support and those preparing the support plans for children when adoption is their plan. Currently there is a support group that meets on Monday evenings (Happy Mondays). This session is used for guest speakers and for adopters to discuss their own issues and gain support from each other as well as the very able coordinating worker.

Some adopters are not aware of the support available to them. There is an example of support not being offered to a family where there were two child protection referrals made. The family gained some support via referral from their General Practitioner (GP), but when visited by a worker from the CAMHS team said she, 'felt like I was not believed' and of their hope of functioning as a family, that 'that's never going to happen'. One couple of adopters spoke of their relief in meeting a member of the LAAC team. They said 'had we known what we know now we wouldn't have been in despair'.

Effective use is made of specialist advisors to the service. The medical advisor is clear, informative and child focused. Her advice is valued by staff and adopters, who meet with her as part of the information sharing about the child. Staff find the medical advisor accessible and very helpful. Legal advice is similarly available and accessible.

RMBC has used an independent social worker to provide adoption support for a child placed outside the area. No check was undertaken to ensure the individual was a registered Adoption Support Agency and employment checks were not undertaken by RMBC. This arrangement has now ceased, but the service must ensure that children are not left vulnerable by the failure to undertake appropriate checks.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

There is evidence from the child placement reports (CPR) seen that birth parents are aware of their children's plans and have an opportunity to comment on them. This is reflected in comments by placing social workers who recognised the importance of birth parents' contributions to their child's heritage. Workers demonstrated a clear understanding of the life long implications of adoption. However, none of the CPR's seen have photographs of birth parents, as indicated on the form. There are some examples as well of birth parents not having seen the CPR before it was presented to panel and of one parent not being shown the report because she was in prison. One birth parent commented that he did not feel his views were listened to.

A letterbox exchange is in place for indirect contact between birth families and their children. It is well supported by an effective administrative process. All exchanges are copied. The social work overview is provided through duty. The duty worker takes on pieces of work and follows them through to conclusion. There is no specific social work focus on the letterbox. No reminders are sent, unless there is a concern raised by a recipient when a letter fails to arrive. A concern is raised by a birth parent who was told eight and a half months after sending his letter that it was not appropriate. The same parent reported he has no contact and is unclear about the expectations of the arrangement.

All staff acknowledged the importance of direct work with children including life story work. Workers spoke of a strong management commitment to this work, which allows them to prioritise life story work and to complete life story books with children. Social workers demonstrated an enthusiasm and understanding of this work, which is commendable.

Independent support to birth families is provided through a service level agreement with After Adoption Yorkshire, a local independent agency. Birth parents are given leaflets with information about this service and it is left to them to make direct contact. Managers reported their concern that this service is not well used.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

There is a compliant statement of purpose in place. The information included about After Adoption Yorkshire refers incorrectly to support being offered to adoptive families. The children's guide is compliant and is available in different formats

dependant on the child's needs. It is the result of direct consultation with Rotherham children. The flowchart in the guide is inaccurate in the order of some of the stages but does provide an overview of the adoption process.

The information provided for prospective adopters gives the basic information they need. It has information about recruitment and the range of children in RMBC who need adoptive placements. It makes it clear that applicants are welcomed from a wide range of people but does not include information on some of RMBC's relevant policies, such as their smoking policy.

The nominated manager and team manager have the appropriate skills, experience and qualifications for their roles. Their management has maintained commitment, enthusiasm and high morale in the team at a time of stress and change within RMBC. Administrative staff reported feeling a well established part of the team, who they feel appreciate them and their work. They feel well supported in their roles. Supervision is given priority by managers and seen as useful by staff. Formal, planned supervision is usually monthly and other sessions are arranged as needed. Staff spoke highly of the training available to them. Training is planned and agreed on the basis of personal development plans, which are in place for all staff. One worker said they had 'a lot of appropriate training'. The adoption team have access to specialist training. Some of the team have attended Dan Hughes' training and managers plan to provide more of this on an 'in house' basis.

The number of workers in the adoption team is small and they cover the whole range of adoption services, including step parent adoption, between them. There have been significant staffing difficulties through sickness and vacancies which have been hard to fill in recent years. Managers reported that by the end of January 2008 the team should be fully staffed for the first time in two years. It is within this context that delays are evident within the approval process for prospective adopters and there is a lack of coordination of adoption support work. The expectation that workers cover the whole range of adoption work leaves some aspects more vulnerable as identified in earlier sections of this report. Currently some adoption service reports are written by an unqualified worker under supervision of a social worker, which does not comply with the regulation on restricted practice.

Despite the changes taking place in RMBC and the uncertainty this brings, staff are strongly loyal and committed to working here. Staff spoken to commented on the support of managers and the flexibility of RMBC as an employer. An example of this is that staff are able to work 'compressed hours', (working more hours on certain days), if this suits their home arrangements. Comments are made about managers' support and sensitivity when a worker returns from sick leave. A scheme is in place that allows social workers an additional three days leave. One worker said, 'I personally feel very well looked after'.

The cabinet for RMBC is kept well informed of developments within the adoption service. In addition to an annual report on the service there are quarterly performance reports, which keep councillors up to date. There was evidence of a strong sense of councillor's responsibility and understanding of corporate parenting.

The records kept on children and adopters are both well ordered. The children's files have clear guidance about the content and where to file it. The files have evidence of files audits and of supervision decisions. Not all forms and audits were signed and some forms are not fully completed. Separate records are held in relation to complaints and allegations.

Personnel files and panel members' files are compliant for all established staff. This is not the case for the independent social worker used by the service, where the file lacks evidence of qualifications, a photograph, verification of identity and of one reference. The archive is well maintained and files are stored appropriately.

The premises are crowded and parts are in a poor state of decoration. As part of the reorganisation being undertaken by RMBC, managers reported new premises will be available within the year. There is a need for the panel to have access to an additional room to allow for confidential discussion with attendees.

There is a disaster recovery plan in place, which was put into use during flooding last summer.

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
6	ensure written adoption support assessments are completed [NMS 6] [Adoption Support service Regulations 2005. 13]	31/03/2008
18	ensure that checks are undertaken in relation to specialist workers to make sure they are registered to undertake adoption support work or that employment checks are undertaken by RMBC [section 4 of Care Standards Act 2000 subsection (7A)].	31/03/2008

Recommendations

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

- ensure consistent application of the established smoking policy [NMS 4.8]
- ensure prospective adopters' applications are taken before attendance at the preparation course and delays in attending the course and in starting the

- assessment should be minimised [NMS 4]
- ensure the equivalent to Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks are undertaken if prospective adopters have lived abroad and that weapons are included in the health and safety check undertaken [NMS 4]
 - the appointment of an independent panel advisor who would have no conflict of interest with the matters being presented [NMS 11]
 - ensure the decision maker does not consult with any panel member in reaching a decision [NMS 13]
 - ensure that the written child protection policy is focused on the child, includes those provided with adoption support services and allegations of historical abuse [NMS 32]
 - ensure adoption support is given appropriate staff time and that it is coordinated across the service
 - ensure that clear contracts are in place to enable birth families to contribute to the maintenance of their child's heritage [NMS 8]
 - appropriate social work time is given to contact arrangements to enable birth families to contribute to the heritage of their children [NMS 8]
 - ensure consideration is given to developing the service for working with and supporting birth families to encourage their use of this service [NMS 9]
 - review the information about After Adoption Yorkshire, which is included in the statement of purpose [NMS 1]
 - ensure all restricted reports are completed by a qualified social worker [NMS 21]
 - ensure comprehensive and accurate case records are maintained for each child and adopter, which includes the full completion of forms and signatures on documentation [NMS 25]
 - ensure that up-to-date, comprehensive personnel files are maintained for each member of staff, including independent workers [NMS 28]
 - ensure a room is available for confidential discussion with adoption panel attendees to ensure the premises used are appropriate for the purpose of panel [NMS 29].