

Barnsley 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

The agency undertakes, or makes arrangements for, all statutory adoption work with children and those affected by adoption. This includes the recruitment, preparation assessment and approval of domestic adopters and those who wish to adopt a child from overseas; the latter is through an arrangement with a voluntary adoption agency. Adoption support services are arranged, in the main, through a service level agreement with an adoption support agency.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The agency has a strong commitment to best outcomes for children and arranges its adoption services in a way that promotes their safety and well-being. There is a thorough approach to the preparation and assessment of prospective adopters, with a corresponding emphasis on making sure that the most suitable matches are achieved. This is underpinned by sound policies and procedures that inform the work of skilled and experienced managers and staff.

There is a committed approach to placement support and adopters enjoy a full and thorough service from their social workers. Other support services are a developing aspect of the agency's operations, mainly delivered in partnership with other independent agencies, but are not fully coordinated and monitored.

Birth parents are encouraged and enabled to be involved in the planning for their children's futures and independent support is available to them. They contribute to their children's histories and the agency has developed a strong commitment to promoting the importance of life-story work for adopted children.

The management framework encourages and promotes good practice and the authority demonstrates a commitment to staff, their training, support and development. The infrastructure is clear, and lines of accountability and communication are understood by all. Resources are suitably organised and administrative systems complement and support the core work of the agency.

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency has made considerable strides in the last three years. The most important areas being in the area of policy direction, life-story work and the operations surrounding the adoption panel. There has also been a commitment to the provision of much better training and development resources for workers which has enabled the staff to increase their skill and knowledge base.

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 demonstrated that it is a child-focused adoption service that is committed to placing children with the most appropriate families that are able meet their needs and keep them safe.

The recruitment strategy is clear about the adopters required to meet the needs of children with the most complex circumstances, and operations reflect this. There are also systems in place to prioritise applicants depending upon what they can offer to the children awaiting families. The agency has had only one disruption in the preceding six years, which demonstrates a successful approach to careful and considered matching.

The approach to preparing and assessing prospective adopters is thorough, rigorous and undertaken with a commitment to ensuring people are suitable to provide homes for children. Preparation training has been recently extended from three and a half days to five days, which shows a determined commitment to providing applicants with a firm foundation for their adoption journey. The preparation is based on sound practices and contemporary thinking in adoption matters.

Assessments are thorough with an analytical approach to understanding family circumstances and backgrounds. Checks on applicants are undertaken with due rigour and with care being taken to incorporate more detailed explorations whenever necessary.

The family finding and matching process is managed well by all parties with everyone working in cooperation to effect the best outcome for children. Families are provided with all relevant and necessary information about children to enable them to consider the appropriateness of the match, although this is sometimes managed less efficiently than it should be. There is also some inconsistency in the quality of information in some of the Child Permanence Reports that the agency has yet to overcome.

The appropriately constituted adoption panel, which is chaired by a qualified and experienced professional, continues the thoroughness of approach to the assessment of adopters. It provides a rigorous and thoughtful analysis of the information provided and makes considered recommendations to the agency decision-maker. Although there are two vacancies for panel members, which the agency has made efforts to fill, it always meets as a quorum. The administration of the panel process is

managed efficiently although there has been some inconsistency in the quality of the minutes produced in recent times and the extracts of minutes placed on case files do not detail members' attendance.

The decision-maker demonstrates a committed approach to the approval of adopters and finalises the process in a timely way.

The authority has safe recruitment practices that ensure only appropriate and suitable workers are employed. The managers and staff of the agency are very experienced, qualified and skilled professionals who exhibit a commitment to the well-being of adopted children. The agency demonstrates a collective understanding and knowledge of adoption matters in their widest context, and was clearly fully informed about current practice and legislation.

The agency's commitment to the safety of children is clear from the discrete adoption child protection procedures that are in place, which are in addition to the corporate safeguarding procedures adopted by the authority.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is satisfactory.

The support to adopters following their approval is undertaken in a way that enables them to feel confident and prepared for the next part of the adoption process. Adoption workers stimulate close cooperation with children's social workers to effect smooth introductions and placements; this provides families with a strong foundation for their new situations. Thereafter, the agency provides a committed and responsive support service that families are very appreciative of; this includes advice and access to resources that children and families may need to enable them to form successful and permanent attachments.

The resources available to the agency for specialist advice include the medical advisor, who is a regular attendee at the panel, legal advisor and services provided by The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). However, CAMHS has limited access and the NSPCC only provides some specialist services in limited circumstances.

Post adoption support is a developing aspect of the agency's operations; a new strategic plan is in place but not fully operational. In the meantime, the management of and arrangements for adoption support are somewhat piecemeal. Nevertheless, there is some good work being undertaken, both by workers in the adoption team and through a contract with an Adoption Support Agency. Although the agency monitors value for money within this contract, monitoring outcomes and user satisfaction is less well managed. Appropriate assessments of need are undertaken and services delivered based on that need, and the wishes of the service user; support is provided or arranged for anyone, adults and children, affected by adoption.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency demonstrated a commitment to working with birth parents and to encouraging, and enabling, them to participate in the planning for their children's futures. Although there was some inconsistency in the recording of birth parents wishes and feelings it is clear that social workers and reviewing officers make every effort to engage with birth families, often in difficult circumstances.

The approach to life-story work and preparing information about the child, and his birth family's history, has a high priority. There has been a new procedure and protocol introduced that has placed a greater emphasis on this area of practice. Life-story books are now produced in a timely way. The 'letterbox' system of managing indirect contact between adopted children and their birth families is well managed. There are also arrangements in place for birth parents to have assistance in writing 'letterbox' contact letters to their adopted children.

Birth parents are provided with information about an Adoption Support Agency that provides independent support and counselling.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The management and organisation of the agency is underpinned by a statement of purpose; this is supported by a range of policies and procedures that reflect the responsibilities, aims and objectives of the service. The children's guide has only recently been produced in its current format and had not been widely distributed.

The information provided for adopters is of a good standard, it is informative about adoption in general and Barnsley's approach specifically; information packs are sent out in a timely way.

The managers of the agency have a wide experience, knowledge and understanding of social work with children and adoption. They are suitably qualified, and demonstrate management competence and expertise at both strategic and operational level. The managers are supported by a committed and enthusiastic executive that monitors the work of the service well.

The organisational arrangements for managing staff, their allocation of work and

workload monitoring are of a good standard. Workers have a varied caseload and are allocated duties depending on capacity, expertise and interest. Supervision is regular and supportive, providing workers with an encouraging and developmental environment. This supportive infrastructure is evident throughout the agency with an overall enabling culture being the approach of the authority as a whole.

Recent staffing shortages have led to some delays in processing prospective adopters' applications and assessments, but there have been arrangements put in place to assist in reducing the workload. Also, administrative support is at a premium and adds to the capacity burden across the service.

Training opportunities are a central tenet of the agency's approach to staff support and development. There are good training facilities and resources available, enabling workers to expand their knowledge and skills in a considered and supportive way.

The case records in respect of prospective and approved adopters are well managed and provide for easy access to information. They include all required information, although contemporaneous recording was perfunctory in some instances. Arrangements for access to records are appropriate and supported by appropriate policies and procedures. Administrative processes are well managed and the arrangements for secure storage and retrieval of records are suitably organised.

The records in respect of staff and adoption panel members are, in the main, well ordered and include most required information; this demonstrates a robust approach to recruitment practices.

The premises occupied by the agency are well located and provide a comfortable working environment for staff. The arrangements for security and administration of the agency are well managed and it is suitably equipped with information technology and all necessary resources.

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):

- develop a more consistent approach to the writing of Child Permanence Reports to enable adopters to be fully informed at the matching stage. (NMS 5)
- ensure panel minute extracts placed on case files include the names of members in attendance. (NMS 12.3)
- provide a clear and manageable operational model based on the strategy for post adoption support. (NMS 33)
- provide detailed contemporaneous case recording in all case files. (NMS 25)