

Sefton MBC 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

Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council's adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters. The Council has commissioned a similar service for inter-country adopters from a local voluntary adoption agency.

In addition, the service carries out the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters; the support of adoption placements; post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, including birth records counselling and intermediary work. The service also operates and maintains a letter box system, which supports the exchange of information in adoption placements. An independent counselling and support service is provided to birth parents through commissioning arrangements with a voluntary adoption agency.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

The inspection of the Sefton's Metropolitan Borough Council was an announced inspection.

The main focus of the inspection was to determine whether the adoption agency was providing a qualitative adoption service, with the children's welfare, safety and needs at the centre of the adoption process and permanent, stable adoptive homes provided.

All the Adoption National Minimum Standards (NMS) and the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003 were assessed under the outcome areas of Staying Safe, Enjoying and Achieving, Positive Contribution and Organisation. Overall, the adoption service was meeting the Adoption NMS and the Adoption Agencies Regulations. The outcome areas of Staying Safe and Organisation were judged as satisfactory. Making a Positive Contribution and Enjoying and Achieving were judged as good.

Two actions and 14 recommendations were made in this inspection. One of the actions related to the quality assurance systems used by the agency, which were not robust. The second was about ensuring all the required regulatory information was obtained in relation to personnel. With regard to the 14 recommendations made, seven of these related to improvements in the agency's records and one to the service's quality assurance tool. Another recommendation related to agency decisions

and notifications being made in a timely manner. Four recommendations related to improvements in professional practice and one to recruitment practice.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last full inspection of the Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council was carried out in January 2005, which resulted in three actions and 17 recommendations being made. In January 2006, a visit was made to the adoption service to follow up these actions and recommendations. The service had made strident efforts to address these matters with the result that only one recommendation remained outstanding. This recommendation related to consistency of practice in relation to later life letters, which had been fully addressed at the time of this inspection.

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.

Sefton's adoption service has a recruitment strategy, which is based on an awareness of children requiring adoption. It is a good, effective strategy that ensures there are sufficient adopters to meet the needs of children requiring adoptive placements. There are clear processes and procedures to handle adoption enquiries and to follow up any expressions of interest. Information meetings are held on a regular basis and adopters are complimentary about the presentation and quality of information provided.

The adoption service is child focussed and makes efforts to ensure children are matched with adopters, who best meet their assessed needs, for example, enabling brothers and sisters to be placed together, if this is assessed as appropriate. It also fully recognises that a child's needs are a paramount consideration in matching a child to adopters. The service has therefore worked hard to improve the quality of information provided adopters, which has included mentoring childcare workers in the completion of the child permanence report (CPR). However, despite this work, the CPRs are of variable quality, for example, in one CPR there was insufficient detail regarding a child's emotional and special needs. In another, there was insufficient information regarding the child's half-sibling. This lack of consistent, detailed and qualitative written assessments of children's needs significantly impairs the effectiveness of the matching process and thereby increases the potential for an adoption breakdown.

There is a formal preparation, assessment and approval process of adopters. Preparation training is tailored to meet the varying needs of adopters, for example, second time round adopters. In addition, the service has also made arrangements for

those wishing to adopt a child from overseas to attend inter-country preparation groups, which are provided in collaboration with another agency.

Adopters spoke positively about the preparation training stating that it was 'well organised'. The training materials used 'informative', 'honest', 'stimulating' and 'well presented'. Adopters stated that staff were 'very welcoming' and made a great effort to ensure people were 'put at their ease'. A number of adopters commented positively about the 'inclusive atmosphere' created and the 'interactive nature' of the training groups, which had increased their participation in group exercises and discussions.

Adopters' assessments are of variable quality; with some of a good standard, in so far as they are thorough, analytical and cover such issues as parenting capacity and diversity well. However, others were of a poorer standard and required further exploration of some issues, for example, in one assessment, the marital breakdown of an applicant's first marriage, in another assessment, the family dynamics and relationships. Neither had the individual views of each child regarding the introduction of another child in the family been obtained; nor had the likely impact on them been fully assessed and analysed. The service obtains written references in relation to the adopters, employer references and checks with applicants' former partners. However, in one file, no employment reference had been sought in relation to one of the applicants. All necessary enquiries and statutory checks in relation to prospective adopters and other members of the household, who are aged 16 years or over are obtained. In some files though, the internal form used to record Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks did not always contain the necessary information, for example, the date of the CRB. This made it difficult to audit and evidence that the CRB checks had been obtained. The agency ensures adopters are able to look after children in a safe manner through the use of a comprehensive health and safety checklist.

Adopters are positive about the assessment process, which they described as 'open' and 'transparent'. Staff were said to carry out their work in a 'professional', 'knowledgeable' and 'sensitive' manner. All adopters stated that their report was accurate and given to them in the required legislative timescale.

Adopters receive written information regarding the matching, introductory and placement processes. Information is also provided regarding the National Adoption Register.

There are clearly written adoption panel policies and procedures, which fully meet the adoption NMS and Regulations (Regs).

Adopters are invited to attend the adoption panel. Good preparatory work is undertaken with them prior to their attendance. Adopters stated that the chairperson and panel members 'welcomed' them and made real efforts to put them 'at ease'. They stated that the questions asked were 'appropriate' and 'pertinent'.

The panel is appropriately constituted and arranged at a frequency that avoids any

delay in considering the approval of prospective adopters. The panel is well organised and chaired. Panel members are well prepared, make appropriate observations and ask relevant questions. However, on occasions not all the necessary information is provided to the panel in advance of the panel date, for example, local authority enquiries. Panel minutes are informative and clearly state the panel's discussion, however, the reasons for the panel's conclusions and recommendations are not always clearly recorded.

The agency's decision maker ensures all information relating to a case, as well as the panel minutes, are thoroughly scrutinised before making a decision. Notifications of the decision though are not always sent out within the necessary timescales.

The manager and all staff working within the adoption service are all appropriately qualified, skilled and experienced in their work. Staff recruitment systems though are not sufficiently robust to ensure children are adequately safeguarded.

There is a safeguarding policy and procedure, which fully meets the adoption NMS and Regs. A good recording system is in place to enable staff to record safeguarding issues effectively. All those working in the service are well supported to handle and manage safeguarding issues.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The adoption service fully recognises the importance of providing sensitive and qualitative support to adopters in maintaining stable and permanent homes for children. Considerable efforts are therefore made for adopters to retain their social worker following their approval. This arrangement continues throughout the matching, introductions to and placement of children, until at least the adoption order is made.

It has also developed a range of support services, which are available for adopters both before and after the adoption order. These services include financial support packages, a quarterly news letter, social events and support groups for adopters. Internal and external training is also provided to adopters. Adopters are also able to access a variety of specialist services to meet specific needs, for example, additional educational support, services from educational psychologists, therapeutic services from a local independent children's charity child, as well as from the child and adolescent mental health service (CAHMS). They also have a contract with an adoption support agency to provide additional support services.

Sefton has commissioned a voluntary agency, to provide a service to inter country adopters, which also includes the provision of support services.

Adopters are made aware of the support services available at an early stage in their contact with the agency. Adoption support plans were generally of a good stand. Requests for support are responded to promptly and the support provided is

described as being of a 'very good standard'. Adopters confirm that they have been informed of the support package available to them and are confident such support will be provided, if required.

The adoption service has access to a variety of specialist advisers, with written protocols in place regarding their roles. The range of specialist services available increases the likelihood of adopters receiving appropriate support at all stages of the adoption process. Both staff and adopters indicated that the specialist advisers provided a good service and are a valuable asset to the agency's adoption services.

The service responds promptly to adoption enquiries, which are dealt with in a thoughtful and sensitive manner. Agency practice is focused on those using the service. They are listened to and their wishes and feelings considered. The service fully consults and encourages service users to be involved in any decisions made, which affects their life. The agency also ensures that the welfare and safety of the service user and others affected by the adoption are carefully considered, before deciding any service should be provided. Any adoption service commissioned by the agency is supported by a written agreement, which is regularly reviewed. This ensures the service provided is of the required qualitative standard and able to meet the needs of the agency and its service users.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Sefton makes every effort to work with birth parents to plan for children's futures and although cooperation is often difficult to maintain; it is clear that appropriate efforts are made. The views of birth parents are sought and recorded in Child Permanence Reports.

The adoption service also has a contract with an independent organisation to offer independent support and counselling to birth parents and families. Clear arrangements are in place to monitor the service's effectiveness and ensure it provides value for money.

There is a strong commitment to preparing a child for adoption and develop a coordinated approach to the production of life-story work. However, life story work is not carried out to a consistent standard; for whilst there are some good examples of such work being completed in a timely way; there are other examples, where there has been some delay in gathering information and completing the life story book.

Contact arrangements are well recorded. Direct contact is usually managed by the adopters; however, Sefton will provide adopters support, where the arrangements are difficult or complex. Arrangements for indirect contact are managed through the letter box system. This is a robust system, which is managed in an effective and efficient manner.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The adoption agency has an up-to-date statement of purpose (SOP), which quite clearly details its aims, objectives and the services provided. This document is supported by a range of policies and procedures, which inform and underpin the operations and strategic direction of the agency.

The service has produced three Children's Guides, which can be produced in a variety of formats to meet children's differing needs. They are attractively presented, written in a child friendly form and contain all the required information.

Adopters are provided with well written, comprehensive information about the adoption process, which is sent out in a timely way. This literature is welcoming, does not discriminate and is attractively presented.

The service has a system in place to prioritise the assessment of those prospective adopters, who are most likely to meet the needs of children waiting to be adopted and this is effectively communicated to adopters.

The management of the agency is undertaken by people who are appropriately qualified and have the necessary background, knowledge and skills in adoption. They demonstrate a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities and are very committed to the service. Staff speak highly of them and indicate that they provide effective leadership of the adoption service.

There are clear written procedures and systems for monitoring and controlling the activities of the adoption service. However, there is some variability regarding the effective operation of these systems. Some systems are robustly applied, for example, the reporting systems to the scrutiny committee, supervisory and appraisal systems. There are others though, such as file sampling and managerial scrutiny systems, which are not as robust.

The agency's staff are clear about their roles, and lines of accountability and communication are good. Staff are able to demonstrate knowledge, experience and skills in working with children in general and adoption in particular. They are encouraged and well supported in their work. Staff acknowledged they receive regular supervision, both on an informal and formal basis. Administrative support is of a very good standard and enables staff to carry out their work in an effective and efficient manner. The adoption service has sufficient staff resources to undertake the range of work required. Staff spoke positively of the wide range of training and professional development opportunities provided and stated they were of a good

standard.

There are appropriate policies and procedures in place for case recording, though some staff were not aware of them. Case records are well organised and maintained. However, not all contained up-to-date, comprehensive or non-stigmatising information. Some records are not dated or signed by the author. There is also inconsistent evidence of managerial oversight in relation to the records.

There is a clearly written policy and procedure in place for accessing records, which meet the legislative requirements and is strictly followed.

The service’s administration is efficient, well managed and appropriately structured to provide support to a busy agency. Administrative records are well maintained and stored in a confidential and secure manner.

Personnel and Panel Members files are well ordered and securely stored. The recruitment and selection process though is not sufficiently robust, as not all personnel files contained the information required, for example, two written references, and telephone verification to confirm the legitimacy of references. Similarly, not all files contain information appertaining to that person and therefore breached confidentiality. Panel members' files contain all the required information.

The premises are very well resourced. There is space, storage, good information technology equipment and communication systems. The premises are accessible, have sufficient parking and are fit for purpose.

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
17	ensure robust quality assurance systems are implemented and maintained for all aspects of the adoption service (Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003, 7(a)(b))	01/05/2008
28	ensure all the required information relating to the adoption service's personnel is obtained (reg.6(2) (c).	01/05/2008

Recommendations

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

- ensure prospective adopters' assessments are of a consistent qualitative standard (NMS 4)
- ensure all necessary enquiries are completed (NMS 4)
- improve the system used to record statutory checks (NMS 4)
- improve the quality of child permanence reports (NMS 5)
- ensure all necessary information is provided panel members in advance of the date of the panel (NMS12)
- improve the quality of the adoption panel minutes (NMS 12)
- ensure agency decisions are made and written notifications of this decision made in a timely manner (NMS 13)
- ensure that life story work and the production of a life story book is carried out to a consistent standard and provided, in a timely way (NMS 8)
- ensure that there are no breaches of confidentiality in agency records (NMS 26)
- improve the quality of case records (NMS 25)
- ensure the system to monitor the quality and adequacy of records is consistently applied and remedial action is taken, when necessary (NMS 27)
- ensure all records are legible, and non-stigmatising (NMS 27)
- ensure case records are signed and dated by the author (NMS 27)
- ensure that there is evidence of telephone verification of references (NMS 19).