

Halton Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Marian Denny / Paul Gillespie
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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

Halton 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 support agency.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This announced interim inspection looked at the progress the service has made with the requirements and recommendations from the last full inspection.

The majority of the National Minimum Standards (NMS) for Adoption and Adoption Agencies Regulations were assessed under the outcome areas of Staying Safe, Enjoying and Achieving, Positive Contribution and Organisation. A judgement for each outcome was reached after assessing a range of information obtained in the inspection.

The agency is meeting the National Minimum Standards for Adoption and the Adoption Agencies Regulations. Consequently, Staying Safe, Enjoying and Achieving, Making a Positive Contribution and Organisation are judged as good.

There was one action and six good practice recommendations made in this inspection. The action related to ensuring all the required regulatory information was obtained in relation to personnel and panel members. With regard to the six recommendations made, five of these related to improvements in the agency's records and one to the quality assurance tool used.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last full inspection carried out in August 2006, resulted in 11 actions and 31 recommendations being made that related to each of the key outcome areas. The

agency has made considerable efforts to address these matters and as a consequence there was only one action that remained outstanding at the time of this inspection. The work undertaken by the agency has resulted in an improved service being provided to adopters, children, their birth parents and family.

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 adoption service's recruitment strategy has been developed to effectively reflect and meet current service needs. It is a good strategy, which is designed to ensure 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 regularly.

There is a formal preparation, assessment and approval process of domestic adopters. A similar service is provided to inter-country adopters through the commissioning arrangements made with a voluntary adoption agency. Preparation training is provided in collaboration with two other neighbouring local authorities. This ensures training takes place frequently and effectively, and meets adopters' needs. The training materials used are appropriate and the preparation includes contributions from an adopter and adopted adult. Preparation training is also tailored to meet the varying needs of adopters, for example, second time round adopters.

The adopters' assessments are comprehensive, well documented and generally of a good standard, for example, issues of parenting capacity are effectively addressed. The views of applicants' children are also fully ascertained and well recorded. All necessary enquiries and statutory checks are carried out, including where applicable, educational and employer references. However, the internal form used to record Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks did not adhere to the guidance provided under the Adoption and Children's act 2002. The agency ensures adopters are able to look after children in a safe manner through the use of a health and safety checklist. The service has introduced the necessary waiver notices, which are now sent to adopters and were evidenced on adopters' files.

The service has introduced a system to monitor the timescales of adopters' assessments. This system is working effectively and all adopters' assessments are carried out in the prescribed timescales.

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. Considerable efforts have been made to improve the quality of information provided to adopters. Staff have therefore been provided with training, as well as being mentored, in completing a 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 intellectual needs. This lack of consistent, detailed and qualitative written assessments of children's needs impairs the effectiveness of the matching process and thereby increases the potential for an adoption breakdown.

Adopters receive written information regarding the matching, introductory and placement processes. Information is also provided regarding the National Adoption Register. This information is reinforced to adopters throughout the adoption process.

The adoption service has developed a good matching tool to enhance the matching process. All matching meetings are now chaired by the adoption team manager.

The agency has improved the systems for obtaining information about a child and their life before adoption, for example, the introduction of life appreciation days. These systems and the work undertaken are being closely monitored, with a view to ensuring that both life story work and books are completed in a timely manner.

The revised written adoption panel policies and procedures fully meet the adoption NMS and Regulations (Regs).

The Panel is appropriately constituted, with additional local authority representatives on the panel to ensure this requirement is always met and the panel quorate. The panel is arranged at a frequency that avoids any delay in considering the approval of prospective adopters. The timescales for panel papers to be distributed to the panel has been increased to ensure panel members receive all necessary information in advance of the panel date. Panel Minutes have been improved and now meet the adoption NMS.

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. Documentation relating to the decision though are not always fully completed.

There is a safeguarding policy and procedure, which fully meets the adoption NMS and Regulations. 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 support to adopters in maintaining stable and permanent homes for children. A clear, coherent,

adoption support strategy and a comprehensive range of support services for adopters has been developed.

Halton 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 have been improved and those seen were generally of a good standard. The plans were signed by all necessary parties and had been distributed in a timely manner. There was evidence that requests for support are responded to promptly and support services provided in a sensitive and thoughtful manner.

The adoption service has access to a variety of specialist advisers, with written protocols in place regarding their roles. There was evidence that the agency uses the services of its specialist advisers to support adopters, for example, opportunities for adopters to see the medical adviser, the involvement of staff from the child and adolescent mental health service (CAHMS). The range of specialist services available to the agency ensures adopters receive appropriate support, at all stages of the adoption process.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The adoption service has developed a clear, strategy in relation to its work with birth parents and their families. Every effort is made to work with birth parents to plan for their 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 CPRS. These views are always fully discussed and considered, before the adoption panel makes any recommendations regarding their children's future.

The adoption service also has a contract with a voluntary organisation to offer independent support and counselling to birth parents and families. Information regarding this service is distributed by a range of staff and is available in a variety of settings in order that birth parents and families are informed of the service. 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 children for adoption and to develop a coordinated approach to the production of life-story work. Clear and appropriate information had been obtained regarding the children and their life before adoption. This information was being provided in accordance with the children's needs and in a timely manner.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency has a Statement of Purpose and Children's Guides which contains all the information required under the Adoption NMS and Regulations.

There are clear written procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the adoption service and a number of quality assurance systems are in place, for example, tracking, supervisory, appraisal systems, the adoption panel, file auditing and sampling, reporting mechanisms to the Council. On the whole, these systems are effective in monitoring the agency's performance. However, some are not as effective, for example, the file audit tool.

The adoption service has sufficient staff resources to undertake the range of work required. Staff are provided with a variety of training and professional development opportunities to enhance their skills and enable staff to be competent in their work.

Case recording policies and procedures have recently been revised and are appropriate. This documentation clearly details when case files should be set up for adopters and children with an adoption plan. Information is also provided regarding the documentation that is to be held on these files. Case records are well organised and maintained. However, despite file sampling and auditing, not all records were fully complete or had been dated and signed by the author. In addition, the file auditing tool used, whilst specific to adoption, did not address how any necessary remedial action was to be monitored to ensure compliance. All adoption records though, were securely stored and kept in accordance with the adoption NMS and Regs.

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

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 contain the information required, for example, two written references. Similarly, not all panel members' files contain the required information.

A Disaster Recovery Plan is in place, which contains all the necessary information to meet the adoption NMS.

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
28	ensure all the required information relating to the adoption service's personnel and panel members is obtained (reg.6(2) (c)).	31/05/2008

Recommendations

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

- ensure the system used to record statutory checks meets the Guidance relating to to the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (NMS 4)
- improve the quality of child permanence reports (NMS 5)
- ensure the forms used to record the agency decision are fully completed (NMS 13)
- ensure case records are fully completed (NMS 25)
- ensure case records are signed and dated by the author (NMS 27)
- ensure the system to monitor the quality and adequacy of records monitors the remedial action to be taken and ensures compliance (NMS 27).