

Trafford MBC Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Marian Denny / Stephen Smith
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Responsible individual	
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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

Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council (TMBC) '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.

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

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The was an announced inspection. All the Adoption National Minimum Standards (NMS) were addressed under the four outcome areas of staying safe, enjoying and achieving, positive contribution and organisation, which were judged as good.

TMBC 's adoption service is extremely child focussed, consequently considerable thought is given to the effective matching of children and adopters. A good range of support services to adopters, both pre and post order is provided. This support is generally well thought out, and families are provided with the necessary support to maximise successful adoption placements.

Considerable efforts are made to engage birth parents in the care planning process and enable them to contribute to their child's future. Life story work is undertaken, however, this work is not always completed in a timely manner. There is a letterbox system and assistance with letterbox contact is available. A counselling and intermediary service is provided to adopted adults and birth relatives. Respect and equality is provided to all those involved in the adoption triangle.

The service is managed effectively and efficiently. Both the management and staff team have considerable knowledge and experience in adoption. However, quality assurance systems used by the service are not sufficiently robust, particularly in relation to personnel, panel members and agency records. These matters need to be

addressed and have been brought to the attention of the service by the actions and recommendations made in this report.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last full inspection of the TMBC was carried out in May 2005, which resulted in nine actions and 15 recommendations being made. The service had made considerable efforts to address these matters with the result that only two actions relating to panel members' files and the Statement of Purpose, and a recommendation relating to supervisors case records remaining outstanding 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 good.

TMBC 's adoption service has a clearly defined recruitment strategy, which reflects the importance of equality and diversity. The recruitment strategy is based on an awareness of the children requiring adoption, which ensures the most appropriate people are approved to offer adoptive placements to children. The service has been successful in placing large sibling groups and older children with adoptive families.

There are clear processes and procedures to handle adoption enquiries with the service following up any expressions of interest from domestic adopters. Inter - country adopters are referred to a Voluntary Adoption Agency, which has been commissioned by Trafford to provide this specialist service. All adopters confirmed that they had received 'useful' and 'prompt' information regarding the adoption process, which had effectively met their needs.

There is a formal process in place for the preparation, assessment and approval of adopters, however applications are taken after preparation courses have commenced. Preparation training is held regularly, with materials used appropriately and effectively. This ensures adopters are fully informed about the complexities of adoption and parenting a child from the care system. Adopters also confirmed this stating the preparation training had been 'invaluable' and enabled them to realise 'the real reality of taking a child into your life'.

Adopters' assessments are generally of good quality. They are thorough, contain a detailed analysis of the information and address the parenting capacity of the applicants well. The service carries out written references in relation to the adopters, however, they do not carry out employer references, though checks with applicants' former partners are undertaken. 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. The service also ensures adopters are able to look after children in a safe manner through the use of a health and safety checklist. However, this checklist is not comprehensive, for example, it does not address the potential dangers of window blind chords.

Adopters were positive about their experience of the assessment process, stating that the assessments had been carried out by extremely professional, by skilled and sensitive staff. All commented on the accuracy and realism of the report, which had been given them in the required legislative timescale.

The agency has a thorough approach to matching, which enables well-planned matches. Adopters are fully informed about the matching process and provided with full information about the child being placed. In situations, where a child has complex needs, adopters are given the opportunity to meet with relevant professionals to gain a greater understanding of these needs. Similarly, the introductions and placement of children with adopters are thorough and well managed. The thoroughness of all these processes provide a good foundation for the stability of the adoption placement, and is a significant factor in the service's very low rate of disruptions.

The adoption panel has a clear written set of policies and procedures which govern its function and operation. There is a well established practice of adopters being invited to attend the panel. The panel is appropriately constituted and arranged at a frequency that avoids any delay in considering the approval of prospective adopters. It is well organised and chaired. Panel members are well prepared, make appropriate observations and ask relevant questions. Panel minutes are informative and reasons for the panel's conclusions and recommendations are clearly recorded.

Adopters are invited to attend the adoption panel. Good preparatory work is undertaken prior to their attendance. Adopters stated that the chairperson and panel members made 'a real efforts to put them at ease', and questions asked were 'appropriate'. This friendliness though, does not detract from the panel's thoroughness in considering matters before them.

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 are always sent out within the necessary timescales.

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

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Trafford has developed a full range of pre and post adoption support services. These services are provided in a variety of ways, for example, some services are provided directly by Trafford, whilst others are provided in partnership with a local voluntary adoption agency or other services, such as the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).

The support services provided include financial support packages, for example, settling-in grants, adoption allowances and a regular news letter. There is also the Parent Link scheme, which provides peer support, as well as support groups for adopters. In addition, adopters and their children have the opportunity to access other support groups through TMBC's commissioning arrangements with a local voluntary adoption agency. Internal and external training is also provided to adopters.

There are good working relationships between the adoption service and other Council services. This has resulted in adopters accessing a variety of specialist services to meet specific needs, for example, accessing and obtaining additional educational support to a child. The service will also, if necessary, commission individual therapy for an adoptive family.

Inter-country adopters are also able to access Trafford's support services, as well as those provided by the commissioned voluntary adoption agency.

Adopters are made aware of the support services available at an early stage in their contact with the service, which was confirmed by adopters. Adoption support plans are generally of a good standard. Any requests for support are responded to 'promptly', with adopters stating the support packages were 'very well thought out', and 'good support provided'. There was also a real confidence with adopters who had not required support, that should they require such support in the future it would be provided.

The adoption service has access to a range of specialist advisers, which enables adopters to receive appropriate support at all stages of the adoption process. Staff indicated that these specialist advisers provided the adoption service, with a good service and this view was also held by adopters.

The adoption service's practice is child focussed. This practice, together with the strong support given to adoptive placements and good quality matching of children with adopters, has undoubtedly contributed to the promotion of stable and successful adoption placements.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The adoption service is committed to working with birth parents and encourages them to be as fully involved as possible in planning for their children's future. Whilst at times their cooperation is difficult to maintain, it is clear that TMBC makes appropriate efforts to involve them in this care planning process. Views of birth parents are sought and recorded in child permanence reports.

Support is provided to birth parents and their families at an early stage. TMBC have a contract with a voluntary adoption agency to offer independent support and counselling to birth parents and families. Written information regarding this service is provided to birth parents and families, at various stages of the adoption process, for example, when an adoption plan is being considered for their child, as well as at the matching and placement process. Birth parents and their families are able to access this service at any time, and work with them is carried out in a thoughtful and sensitive manner. This contract is carefully monitored to ensure that it provides a qualitative service and value for money.

The adoption service also provides an opportunity for the birth and adoptive parents to meet. This enables adopters to receive information from the birth parents, first hand and can provide them with a firm basis for future contact arrangements. These meetings are prepared for carefully, sensitively handled and generally well managed.

Trafford has a commitment to gathering information about children's backgrounds and encouraging birth families to contribute to their child's heritage. They are also recognising the importance of ensuring life story work is undertaken with a child, and use such work to prepare a child for adoption. However, such work and the production of life story books are not always carried out in timely way.

TMBC has a limited number of direct contact arrangements, however, the service will provide adopters with support, where the arrangements are difficult or complex. All contact arrangements are well recorded. 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. In addition to this, the agency provides a birth records counselling service. Experiences and learning derived from this work is used to inform adoption practice.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The adoption service carries out its various tasks and responsibilities effectively and efficiently. Its Statement of Purpose (SOP) is up-to-date and clearly details its aims, objectives and the services provided. However, this document does not contain all the required information. The SOP is supported by a range of policies and procedures, which informs and underpins the operations and strategic direction of the agency.

The service's two Children's Guides 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, is attractively presented and is clearly in their practice. A system is 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 adoption service 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 committed to the service. Staff speak highly of them and indicate that the adoption service is effectively led and managed.

There are a number of quality assurance systems in place to monitor the agency's performance, though some improvements are required. The Council is committed to the adoption of children as a positive choice for permanence, however receiving six monthly written reports on the management and outcomes of the adoption service would enable its progress to be more effectively monitored.

Staff are clear about their roles and lines of accountability and communication is good. Staff have considerable knowledge, skills and experience in working with children and specifically, children placed for adoption. The allocation of work is managed equitably. All staff receive regular qualitative, informal, and formal supervision and good standards of work are achieved. Similarly, administrative support is of a good standard, enabling 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 range of training and professional development opportunities provided, stating they were of a good standard.

There are appropriate policies and procedures in place for case recording. Case records are well organised and maintained. The majority contained full and up-to-date information, though not all records are dated and signed. Administrative records

are well maintained and stored in a confidential, 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 contain the information required, for example, two written references. There is a system to verify the legitimacy of references though this requires development. Similarly, panel members' files did not contain all the required information.

The premises are fit for purpose, well resourced, accessible and secure. However, the service does not have a Disaster Recovery Plan.

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
1	ensure the Statement of Purpose contains all the information required by regulation (Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003, 2 (1))	01/12/2008
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))	01/01/2009
28	ensure all the required information relating to the adoption service's personnel and panel members are obtained (Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003, 6 (2)(c).	01/01/2009

Recommendations

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

- ensure the application for the assessment of adopters is completed prior to the preparation training (NMS 4)
- improve the health and safety checklist for prospective adopters (NMS 4)
- ensure that life story work and the production of a life story book is carried out in a timely way (NMS 8)
- improve the quality of agency records, so that supervisors' decisions recorded; all records are fully completed, signed, dated and comply with confidentiality (NMS 25)

- ensure the adoption service has a Disaster Recovery Plan (NMS 29).