

City of Wakefield Metropolitan DC Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Stephen Smith / Shaun Common
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Setting address	City of Wakefield Metropolitan DC Adoption Service, Family Placement team, Flanshaw Centre, Flanshaw, Wakefield, WF2 9QP
Telephone number	01924 302 160
Email	
Registered person	Wakefield Metropolitan District Council
Registered manager	Julie Chew
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

Wakefield Metropolitan District Council adoption service undertakes, or makes arrangements for, all statutory responsibilities in respect of the adoption of children. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of people who adopt children from this country. The council commissions a service from a local voluntary adoption agency for those wishing to adopt from overseas. The agency provides, or makes arrangements for, the support of anyone affected by adoption, including birth families and adopted adults.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This was an announced inspection of the adoption agency. The purpose of the inspection was to assess the agency's compliance with the adoption national minimum standards. All the standards were inspected under the four outcome areas of staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and organisation. The agency has worked hard since the last inspection to improve the service it provides and is now satisfactory.

The agency's processes for assessing adoptive parents are now generally robust and more timely than before. Although matching arrangements are not yet sufficiently formalised and the quality of child permanence reports are variable, matching is appropriate. Adoption support is an area in which the service is developing and some aspects of its work in this area show real promise. However, quality assurance is not robust enough to ensure the quality and effectiveness of the adoption service being delivered.

Improvements since the last inspection

Since the last inspection the agency has improved the arrangements it makes for the operation of its adoption panels and significantly improved its arrangements for providing support to those people affected by adoption. Staffing arrangements in the agency have been stabilised and the quality of children's and adopters' case records has been improved. The agency is also more effective in prioritising the assessments of adopters most likely to meet the needs of the authority's children waiting for placements.

However, there are still weaknesses in the monitoring and controlling of the agency's operations and in the arrangements for quality assuring the adoption work carried out. Information for children about adoption is still not comprehensive enough or accessible for younger children or those with disabilities.

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.

The agency has developed an adopter recruitment strategy but this is now out of date. Although informal information sharing takes place there is no formal system for identifying the sorts of adopters required to meet the needs of children who may require adoptive placements. This limits the agency's ability to plan its recruitment to ensure that the needs of the authority's children can be met.

People who are able to provide homes for children with particular or complex needs are appropriately prioritised or 'fast-tracked' through the adoption assessment process. Informally, adoption and field social work staff liaise to arrange matches between children and adopters and there is a good record of successful adoptions. Matching appears effective as there have been no recent disruptions. However, there is no formal, structured process in place by which to make these matching decisions. This weakens the decision making process and does not provide enough evidence of thorough and rigorous practice for any child looking at their records in later life. The quality of information about children included in child permanence reports for the matching process is variable. Some are of very good quality while others are weaker. This does not assist the matching process although there continues to be an overall improvement in the quality of these documents.

The preparation, training and assessment of prospective adopters is thorough and undertaken with care and attention to detail. Thorough checks on the suitability and competence of prospective adopters take place. Reports are well written and reflect the process that adopters have undertaken. This provides the adoption panels with the necessary information on which to make their recommendations on the suitability of applicants. Health and safety checklists do not include consideration of risks arising from window blind cords and as such they do not afford a wide ranging enough assessment of possible risk. The agency has worked hard to address issues of delay within the assessment process. Recent assessments have been appropriately prompt and timely.

The adoption panels, which are both suitably constituted and appropriately managed, undertake their responsibilities with commitment. They are thorough in their analysis of reports submitted and conscientious about the recommendations they make. The administration of the panels enables business to be conducted in a timely way. The authority's panel procedures require that panel members cannot take up their duties until they have undertaken a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check. This procedure has not been followed. Although the regulation relating to recruitment checks does

not apply to panel members the authority is expected to satisfy itself that it has checked members thoroughly.

An effective working relationship is developing between the panel chair and the relatively new agency decision maker. Decision making is prompt and shows a thoroughness which ensures children have the most suitable placements in adoptive families.

Arrangements for introduction meetings and visits between children and their prospective adopters are sometimes made before the notice of decision has been received from the decision maker. This could cause disruption to the planning process and possible distress for the child and adopters should a decision be delayed or should a decision be made contrary to panel's recommendation.

The managers and staff of the agency are all suitably experienced. However, full information regarding the suitability of staff is not in place for all staff members and procedures for verifying qualifications do not work in every case. The practice of undertaking telephone calls to verify written references received is not consistently applied. This means that the agency is not as sure of the suitability of all its staff as it should be.

Adoption staff know and understand adoption and social work with children. They understand the legislative framework and the impact it has on children's lives. A clear commitment to children's wellbeing is evident within the adoption team.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency's arrangements for supporting adoptive placements are generally effective. It provides children and adopters with good support throughout the introduction process and ensures that placements are well reviewed and supported. Post adoption support is a developing area of the service's work. Although some people reported some difficulties accessing support, more recent work has been good and creative in the strategies and resources employed to provide support. The service provides a range of flexible and individually tailored support strategies to help adopted children to settle in to their new families and cope with difficulties they may experience. Support provided can range from informal support from workers to more complex work including therapeutic input if needed.

The agency provides a range of support groups and activities for adoptive adults and their birth and adopted children. It produces newsletters and information about other support and resources available. Training is provided for adoptive parents in matters such as attachment and life story work and one-to-one input, advice and training is available. The letterbox arrangements for maintaining contact between adopted children and their birth families are managed effectively. Post adoption support, including birth records counselling is based on effective arrangements and procedures that ensure support is available when requested.

Specialist advice and support resources are readily accessible. Medical advice and support provided to the agency is of good quality and readily available to inform all areas of adoption decision making and to support adoptive families. Legal advice is always provided at panel whenever children are being considered for adoption. Other resources and specialist services are sourced whenever necessary.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

The adoption service is making significant efforts to develop the support it provides to all people who have been affected by adoption, including birth families. Support to birth families is provided by the adoption service itself, as well as contracted from an independent service. Social workers not involved in the case provide counselling and support. Some good work is done by the social workers involved in the case to maintain relationships and offer support. Birth parents are helped, where necessary, to write letters for the letter box and encouraged to maintain contact in line with the contact agreement. Birth parents gave mixed views about how well they feel supported but it is clear that the agency is trying to develop this area of work.

The agency seeks to encourage birth parents to be involved as far as possible in the planning for their children's future. Some very good examples were noted during the inspection of work with parents to seek information to support the adoption process and record their views for both the matching and placement process and for the children's life-story books. These views are recorded within the child permanence report but situations in which parents are consulted but choose not to cooperate are not always recorded well enough. This means that efforts to work with birth parents may not be apparent to a child looking back in later life.

The agency is developing the priority it places upon having good quality life-story work completed in time for children being adopted. The agency has provided training for social workers in life-story work and managers and reviewing officers monitor the readiness of this work. However this emphasis has not yet had sufficient effect and, overall, this work is not consistently timely or good enough to fully support the adoption process. For example, one child's life-story book was not ready for the adoption order and was not suitable for the age of the child.

Letter box arrangements are effective and this is resulting in more consistent contact arrangements between children and their birth families. The authority has recently introduced the practice of holding life appreciation days for children being adopted.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The organisation has a comprehensive statement of purpose in place which accurately sets out the service it provides. It is appropriately monitored and updated as necessary. Staff members know how to access this document. The agency's children's guide, as at the last inspection of the agency is produced in a manner that is attractive to older children. However, the content and style of this guide is not accessible or meaningful for younger children who form the majority of children adopted or those with disabilities. The guide also does not cover all the matters required by regulation.

The agency does not have a current strategy for the recruitment of adoptive parents that sets out its eligibility criteria and arrangements to prioritise adopters who can best meet the needs of the children needing families. A strategy has been developed by the agency which was commendably detailed and helpful but this has not been updated and is now nearly a year out of date. The information pack provided to prospective adopters is appropriate. The organisation has made efforts to make its process of responding to enquiries from prospective adopters more timely and this is now monitored effectively by the manager.

The management of the service, at both strategic and operational levels has seen change since the last inspection but is now stabilised. This stability has improved the quality of the management of the agency and is allowing development work to take place. There is a clear understanding of how adoption fits into the overall context of children's social care. However, planning and quality monitoring and assurance processes are not sufficiently well developed. For example, there are no written procedures in place for monitoring and controlling the agency's activities. The system for assuring the quality and timeliness work carried out and the quality of recordings is not effective enough. Reports on the operation of the adoption agency are submitted to the executive side of the council on an annual, rather than six-monthly basis.

Management and support for staff is of good quality. Workload management is effective and the agency is taking appropriate steps to ensure that previous issues of delay and limited capacity are being resolved. The agency provides its staff with very good support. Training and development opportunities for staff are good with the agency supporting both internal and external training courses. The adoption manager is a qualified and experienced social worker and has gained experience in adoption since their appointment. However, the manager does not have a management qualification.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory.

The agency sets out in its statement of purpose that it will endeavour to recruit carers who reflect ethnically and religiously diverse backgrounds to meet the needs of children looking for adoption and makes clear that disability need not be a bar to adoption. Information for prospective adopters makes this clear. Assessments of

prospective adopters provide a good consideration of about the applicants' views on disability, ethnicity and culture both in terms of the types of children they are being assessed to adopt and also their suitability to bring up children to have balanced, fair and non-discriminatory views. The agency works hard to find appropriately matched placements for children taking into account their background or specific needs. Information in records such as the child permanence reports about children's needs arising from their cultural or ethnic background or disability is variable. Some reports portrayed a very clear picture of the child's needs while others were not as good. Where children's backgrounds or needs are more complex, the adoption service is not always as proactive enough. For example, one adopting couple said that they 'had to push' the agency to provide the specific information about a child's cultural background that they needed.

Case recording is variable in the way it reflects the work undertaken. Files contain checklists to show the steps of the adoption process carried out but these are often not completed. As stated earlier, quality monitoring systems are not as robust as they should be so such matters are not identified and addressed. Case decisions are not, in most cases, clearly recorded on adopters or children's files. Records of decisions are important for the legal aspects of the adoption process and for reference by an adopted child in later life.

Staff members' files showed that a generally robust process is followed although some weaknesses were noted.

Other administrative records are of satisfactory quality. Appropriate storage arrangements are in place. The agency does not have a sufficiently detailed or well developed disaster recovery plan that identifies how it will continue to provide services to children and adopters in emergency situations.

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
13	ensure that introductory meetings between children and adopters are not arranged until the agency decision has been made (Reg 35 of the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005)	22/05/2009
1	ensure the children's guide meets the requirements of Schedule 2 (Reg 3 of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003).	22/05/2009

Recommendations

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

- revise and update the adopter recruitment strategy (NMS 2)
- develop a robust and clearly documented process for agreeing matches to be proposed to panel (NMS 2)
- develop a structured process for early identification of children for whom adoption may become the plan to enable this to inform the adopter recruitment process (NMS 2)
- improve the range of the health and safety checklist to ensure that premises are fully checked for all eventualities (NMS 4)
- undertake telephone verification of written references for all people working for the purposes of the agency prior to the commencement of their duties (NMS 19)
- ensure that life story work is available to adopters and children in a timely manner to assist the adoption process (NMS 8)
- develop a children's guide that is suitable for and accessible to young children (NMS 1)
- ensure the manager has a qualification at level 4 NVQ in management or equivalent (NMS 14)
- provide the executive side of the council with reports on the management and outcomes of the agency's services on a six monthly basis (NMS 17.1)
- develop and implement written procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the agency and ensuring quality performance (NMS 17)
- ensure that case management decisions by supervisors are recorded on case files (NMS 25)
- develop the disaster recovery plan to ensure it contains sufficient detail to allow business continuity to be maintained (NMS 29).