

Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Sue Winson / Marian Denny
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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

Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council has a dedicated adoption team which includes social workers who focus on adoption support. The adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters, placement support and post adoption support. They work with children's social workers to ensure that family finding and matching is effective. Contractual arrangements are in place for the assessment of inter-country adopters and for independent support to birth families.

The service works with a group of other local authorities and agencies in the North West (Adoption 22) to place children in appropriate adoptive families. The majority of Bolton children are placed outside of the authority under these arrangements.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This is a good service which has clear aims and objectives and which is effectively managed. The adoption service has consolidated and developed since splitting from the family placement team. Adopters are recruited, trained and supported to meet children's needs. The welfare and safety of children is at the centre of the adoption process. Managers and staff of the adoption team have considerable experience and skills and work co-operatively with children's social workers to achieve positive outcomes. Improving the quality of Child Permanence Reports (CPR's) and the establishment of more robust monitoring and auditing systems are areas for improvement.

Improvements since the last inspection

The majority of actions from the last inspection have been addressed. A children's guide to the service is in place. There is a policy to safeguard children placed for adoption or in receipt of adoption support services which informs practice. Policies and procedures concerning the provision of adoption support are carried out in practice. Adopters are subject to the full range of statutory checks and the outcomes of these are retained on their files. The majority of written notifications of the agency decision have been made within the timescales.

Recommendations made at the last inspection concerning the timescales for assessments have been acted upon and there are arrangements in place with neighbouring authorities to offer more timely access to preparation groups. A contract with a local agency has been set up to provide a specialist service for

adopters choosing to adopt a child from overseas. Arrangements are in place to ensure that staff Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checks are renewed every 3 years. Decision by supervisors are recorded on case files and are dated. Some delays in completing life story work persist and the role of the panel in scrutinising the timeliness of children's and adopters assessments is developing.

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.

Children are matched with adopters who best meet their assessed needs. As Bolton is a geographically small authority the majority of children are placed outside of the area. Effective and positive working relationships exist between the adoption service and the other authorities and agencies involved in Adoption 22. The manager is involved in the Adoption 22 management group and the team has access to database information about children and families. Where necessary placements outside of the north west are accessed in order to meet children's needs and arrangements are in place to secure funding without delay. The services also uses the national adoption register and takes part in adoption exchange days. An additional post has been secured to develop and target local recruitment.

Children are placed with families who reflect their ethnic origin, culture and language. A small number of children have not been placed with their brothers or sisters due to individual need assessment and reasons for this are documented. The service has been successful in placing older children, children with disabilities and sibling groups in addition to younger children who are the majority. Social workers are clear about balancing the quest for 'ideal' matches with avoiding delays for children. The adoption team encourages the consideration of single adopters and those with medical conditions in a holistic way with a focus on their ability to meet children's needs. Where possible, children's views are taken into account when family finding. There are low level of disruptions of placements and reviews are held which look at what can be learned from these to inform future practice.

Placements are made in a largely timely manner and where there have been delays the service are aware of the reasons. An adoption team worker is allocated early in the process to work alongside each child's social worker in family finding. This is an effective system in identifying potential families and, along with profiling and planning meetings, ensures that children are matched with families who meet their needs in a planned way which avoids delay. Introductions and placements are well managed and mid point reviews take place. Adopters are involved in matching meetings and their views are included in adoption placement reports which are comprehensive. The medical adviser and other professionals involved with children to

talk with adopters or attend meetings to provide full information.

The quality of Child Placement Reports (CPR's) is variable. In some cases chronologies are not up to date nor are the views of birth family members included. In others the physical descriptions and personalities of the children and their parents is brief. Some of the CPR's include comprehensive information. The managers are aware of the need to improve the quality in order that the CPR provides a clear, appropriate and coherent account for adopted people who may read them later in their lives.

Clear processes are in place to manage enquiries and applications from prospective adopters which are congruent with the agency's equal opportunities and anti-discriminatory practice. The agency has a contract with an agency to handle inter-country adoptions which includes arrangements for equality and diversity, complaints, review and monitoring. Social workers carry out initial visits to enquirers which are increasingly being used to assess their potential and to allow for prioritisation to meet the needs of children waiting. Application forms are completed prior to preparation groups.

Due to unexpected and unpredictable staffing issues last year the cancellation of a preparation group led to some applicants waiting longer than would be usual. Some were offered preparation groups in neighbouring authorities but chose to wait for the next one in Bolton. Of those adopters visited and those who completed surveys for this inspection a large majority commented positively on the length of the process and all felt that the preparation groups were helpful and interesting. In discussions with adopters it is evident that the groups are effective in informing them about adoption practice and preparing them to meet children's needs. The groups include contributions from adopters, an adopted person, foster carers and adoption support social workers. Feedback is sought from attendees and informs future reviews and development of the course.

The team carries out thorough assessments which include analysis of information with emphasis on applicants' potential to parent and their ability to meet children's needs. Checks including CRB's are taken up prior to panel and there is evidence of in-depth interviews with family members and personal referees. Adopters commented positively on the sensitivity, knowledge and skills of the workers undertaking the assessments. They all have the assessment document prior to panel to check for accuracy and to make comments. Health and safety checks are completed during the assessment of adopters, however they do not all contain information on pets in the family nor is there evidence of updating them to ensure that identified actions have been taken or to take into account specific children.

Adopters prepare a book about themselves for use in preparing children or provide photographs for younger children. Arrangements for notifying the authority in the event of the death of a child or serious illness is in the adoptive parent agreement. Applicants are informed of the independent review mechanism and the national adoption register and leaflets are sent with letters from the agency decision maker where the decision has been not to approve.

Panel policies and procedures are in place which are comprehensive and which are largely carried out in practice. There is an independent panel chair and the members have a range of experience of adoption and reflect the local community. The specific remits of specialist advisors are outlined in writing. Annual reviews take place. Adopters are invited to attend panel and are positive in their comments about being prepared and put at ease. The functioning of the panel is generally efficiently organised and conducted. There is the facility to hold emergency panels to avoid delay. Information is sent out to members in a secure way. Minutes reflect the discussion, however, reasons for decisions are often implicit rather than clearly summarised. In some cases conditional decisions have been made in regard to the approval of adopters.

The Agency Decision Maker (ADM) has access to the case information and panel minutes. Decisions are made in a timely manner but there have been occasions where there have been delays in sending out written confirmation to adopters. Changes in procedures had been put into place prior to this inspection to ensure that the letters are sent out promptly.

Appropriate safeguarding policies are in place and the service manager has links and regular meetings with the safeguarding manager. The manager and staff are suitably qualified, experienced and skilled in adoption work. Staff recruitment practices follow policies and are robust. Social workers in the child and family teams have variable experience in adoption work, however, they have access to more experienced colleagues, adoption social workers and guidance documents prepared by the adoption team. They are positive in their comments about support available to them from the adoption team and manager.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service has a strong approach to providing effective support to adoptive families from early stages in line with written policies and procedures. This includes the waiting period where social workers remain in regular contact. Adopters who completed surveys and those seen during the inspection were unanimously positive about the support available, including out of office hours and at weekends. There is a flexible approach and a commitment to working with adoptive families. A wide range of support is available including emotional health workers, learning mentors, health professionals and psychological services. Adopters have the opportunity to attend a course to help them understand and manage children's behaviour and feedback demonstrates high levels of satisfaction with the learning opportunities. An adoption allowance scheme in place and arrangements to fund therapy are appropriate.

Written plans for adoption support are in place from an early stage and they outline clearly the support needed by individual families and how it will be provided. The adoption support team has good resources and is developing the service.

Experienced practitioners work sensitively and supportively. A newsletter is produced and social events are organised. Adopters are aware of the after adoption support available and the service is active in contacting them three months after the adoption in order to look at support needs. Specialist advisers are valued by social workers and adopters. Examples were given where they have been involved in providing information to potential adopters.

People affected by adoption receive a service from the adoption agency that is appropriate and tailored to their particular need. They are treated fairly, openly and with respect and sensitivity. Written policies are carried out in practice by experienced workers who respond promptly to requests.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

It is evident that social workers are committed to engaging birth families in the adoption process. Examples were given where positive relationships with birth families resulted in them providing information and photographs for children in later life. A contract with a voluntary agency provides a range of services which includes counselling to birth parents and families and they are provided with leaflets outlining the services available. The adoption managers are looking into the reasons for the low take up of this service.

It is evident that adopters are prepared for one off meetings with birth parents and understand the value of maintaining letterbox contact. Systems are in place for the management of the letterbox and assistance is provided to adopters and birth families in writing the letters. Annual reviews of the individual arrangements has just begun. Some delays in life story book production are evident. Independent Reviewing Officers monitor this and have imposed timescales for completion. Later life letters are sensitively written. Foster carers in the authority are skilled in maintaining information for children, including momentos, and in moving them on to adoptive parents.

The adoption agency's service users receive a good quality professional service, based on their needs identified by an assessment. Policies and procedures are followed in practice and people receive services in a timely manner. The service is flexible and wide ranging. Where appropriate people are referred on to other services within the borough. Examples were given where the adoption team has worked effectively with young people and their families to prevent disruptions.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Promoting equality and non-discriminatory practice runs through policies and is largely carried out in practice. The services works to make its services available to the local community. Two serious shortfalls in written documents do not reflect the usual practice of the adoption service, however, managers acknowledged that monitoring and auditing systems had not been sufficiently robust to monitor compliance with equality and diversity policies.

The service has an up to date statement of purpose which clearly outlines its aims and objectives. The children's guide is accessible to children with a range of ages and abilities.

Good quality initial information is sent out to enquirers about adoption and systems are in place to prioritise assessments to meet the needs of children waiting. Adopters are informed of this at early stages. Eligibility criteria is outlined in the written information and on their website and does not discriminate. Clear information to prospective adopters includes the role of the agency. Written information from two adopters, entitled 'Our Story', includes their experiences of meeting birth parents, letterbox and introductions. The service can demonstrate that assessments are carried out within reasonable timescales. Adopters stated that they are kept well informed and feel involved throughout the approval process. Adoptive parent agreements include the local authority's policies on physical punishment and sharing of information. They are clear about the service's expectation of adopters and what adopters can expect from them. Adopters are given written information about the adoption register.

The adoption team manager has considerable experience, knowledge and skills and staff are positive about his leadership role and style. Lines of accountability, responsibilities and levels of delegation are in place and are known to the staff. Staff are well supported and supervised in their work. They are experienced and enthusiastic about their work and open to new ideas and improving outcomes for children. All managers have a strong commitment to adoption and there are links at all levels to other social work teams and services within the authority, including the safeguarding unit. Good communication is evident and there is a clear improvement agenda.

Systems are in place for the monitoring of the adoption service through the regular reports compiled by the quality assurance manager and team manager. These are provided to the Assistant Director Staying Safe who in addition to sending the reports to elected members, meets with them on a regular basis, to ensure that adoption retains it's high profile in Bolton. Services for children for whom adoption is the plan are continuously monitored and scrutinised. In individual social work teams file audits take place intermittently and systematic auditing to ensure quality performance is not evident.

Staff are organised efficiently and it is to the adoption team's credit that their service provision was maintained during a difficult period last year due to unexpected and unpredictable staff absences. This coincided with an increase in the number of children for whom adoption was the plan. The team's skill and experience is valued by colleagues within the borough and in Adoption 22. They work enthusiastically and flexibly and professional development is encouraged. The social workers are regularly supervised and have access to policies and procedures. They are positive about the support and leadership provided by the manager and service manager. The team's administrative staff are integral to the team and provide effective support. They have access to training and supervision arrangements are in place.

Case records are well organised and ordered in line with file index. Records of complaints are maintained. Systems are in place to allow for access to records. Personnel files and adoption panel members files contain the necessary information.

The premises are largely suitable for purpose with the exception of lack of facilities for staff dining away from desks. In addition rooms available for meetings are in limited supply but staff have the facility to book rooms in other offices and venues. A disaster recovery plan in place which is cross referenced to business continuity plan. Arrangements for the storage of records have been reviewed and new arrangements have been proposed to improve the retrieval and quality of records. Appropriate arrangements are in place for the safe storage of electronic records.

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
5	continue with service developments to ensure that full and correct information on children is contained in their Child Permanence Reports (Reg 17 Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005)	15/06/2009
17	ensure that the service is monitored to ensure quality performance consistent with its statement of purpose (Regulation 2).	15/06/2009

Recommendations

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

- ensure that the quality and scope of health and safety assessments is improved (NMS 4)
- ensure that panel decisions are made and recorded in line with written procedures (NMS 10)
- ensure that agency decisions are conveyed to prospective and approved adopters in writing in a timely manner (NMS 13)
- ensure that efforts are made to obtain information from birth parents and families before a child's adoption (NMS 8).