

Halton Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

Unique reference number	SC049148
Inspection date	01/10/2009
Inspector	Marian Denny / Stephen Smith
Type of inspection	Key

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Date of last inspection	03/03/2008

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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 agency.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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 (NMS). All the standards were inspected under the four outcome areas of staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and organisation. In the main, the adoption service was meeting the adoption NMS and Regulations. The outcome areas of staying safe, enjoying and achieving and organisation were judged as good and making a positive contribution, were judged as outstanding.

The agency has a recruitment strategy, which promotes equality and diversity and is clearly based on an awareness of the children requiring adoption. The agency is good at recruiting adopters and undertakes a thorough assessment process, ensuring people are suitable and competent to adopt children. However, the safety checklist used to assess the safety of adopters' home is not comprehensive.

Children are matched with adopters who are suitable to meet their needs. The matching processes and documentation are of a good standard.

Adoption support services are based on an person's assessed needs and services are designed to meet them. Good, effective support is provided to people affected by adoption.

The authority is committed to obtaining information about children's backgrounds

and works hard to encourage birth families to contribute to their child's heritage. Life story work is carried out in a timely manner and the life story book produced to a high standard. Contractual arrangements are in place for independent support to birth families. Adopters are encouraged and supported wherever possible, to meet with birth parents. It also seeks to plan, support and facilitate direct and indirect contact between birth families and children, providing it is in the child's best interests to do so. There is a letterbox system and assistance with letterbox contact is available.

Contractual arrangements are in place for the assessment and support of inter-country adopters.

The adoption policies, procedures and the literature for adopters has been revised in accordance with recent adoption legislation.

The managerial team have considerable experience in adoption and the service is well managed. However, quality assurance systems are not sufficiently robust. A small percentage of adoption records are not fully accurate.

The recruitment and selection process is robust and safeguards children.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last full inspection was carried out in August 2006 and resulted in 11 actions and 31 recommendations being made. These related to each of the key outcome areas. In March 2008, a visit was made to the adoption service to follow up these actions and recommendations. The agency has made considerable efforts to address these matters, with the result that all the actions had been completed and only one recommendation remained outstanding. This recommendation related to the health and safety checklist.

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 has an effective recruitment strategy and is successful in recruiting adopters for children requiring adoptive families. However, as Halton is a small local authority geographically, the majority of children are placed outside the area. Effective and positive working relationships exist between the adoption service, their neighbouring authorities and the local consortium of adoption agencies. The manager is involved in the consortium's management group and the team has access to database information about children and families. Where it is necessary to obtain

adoptive families outside the region in order meet children's needs, arrangements are in place to secure funding without delay. The service also uses the National Adoption Register (NAR) and takes part in adoption exchange days to facilitate an effective match of a child with adopters.

Children are matched to adopters, who best meet their assessed needs and every effort is made to ensure siblings are placed together, if this is assessed as appropriate. Social workers though are clear about the need to balance their search for an 'ideal' match, whilst at the same time avoiding any delays for children. Adoption placements are generally made in a timely manner, however, in the few instances where there has been delay, there are clear reasons for this, which are well documented. The service has been successful in placing older children, children with disabilities and sibling groups. Where possible, children's views are taken into account when family finding. The adoption service has few adoption disruptions, however, if one occurs, a disruption meeting is held and any learning from this is used to inform future practice.

An adoption team worker is allocated early in the adoption process and works alongside each child's social worker in family finding. This is an effective system in identifying potential families and together with profiling and planning meetings, children are matched with families who meet their needs. It also ensures that matching and the placement of a child is carried out in a planned way and avoids delay. Introductions and placements are well managed and mid point reviews take place. Adopters are fully involved in the matching process and their views are included in adoption placement reports. The medical adviser and other professionals involved with children talk with adopters or attend meetings to provide full information.

Since the last inspection, the authority has worked hard to improve the quality of the Child Placement Report (CPR). CPR training has been provided to staff and all reports are quality assured by two managers. The quality of the CPR's are largely good. They contain comprehensive information and a clear, appropriate, coherent historical account, should an adopted person wish to read their adoption record later in life

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 Halton has commissioned to provide this specialist service. All adopters confirmed that they had received 'prompt', 'useful' information regarding the adoption process, which had effectively met their needs.

There is a formal preparation, assessment and approval process of domestic adopters. 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.

Adopters spoke positively about the preparation training stating that it was 'well organised and presented'. The training materials used were said to be 'informative' and 'thought provoking'. Staff were said to be 'friendly' and 'welcoming'. They stated the atmosphere in the groups was 'inclusive' and enabled them to freely participate in group discussions.

Adopters' assessments are of a good quality; in so far as they are thorough, analytical and cover issues, such as loss, life experiences, parenting capacity and support networks well. 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. Checks with applicants' former partners are also undertaken. The service ensures adopters are able to look after children in a safe manner through the use of a health and safety checklist. This checklist though, is not comprehensive, for example, it does not address poisonous plants. The service has introduced an effective system to monitor the timescales of adopters' assessments. Adopters' assessments are now carried out in the prescribed timescales.

Adopters commented positively about the assessment process, which they described as 'open' and 'transparent'. Staff were said to carry out their work in a 'professional', 'knowledgeable', 'skilled' and 'sensitive' manner. All adopters have the assessment document prior to panel to check for accuracy and to make comments. Adopters stated that their report presented 'a realistic picture' of them, was 'accurate' and had been given to them in the required legislative timescale.

Adopters are provided with written information regarding the matching, introductory and placement processes. Information is also provided regarding the NAR and the Independent Review Mechanism. This information is reinforced to adopters throughout the adoption process.

The service has established a system to obtain further information about a child and their life before adoption, with the introduction of life appreciation days. This has enabled adopters to obtain more detailed information regarding the child with whom they have been matched. Adopters, who had attended these meetings, were extremely positive about them, stating that the information obtained had been 'invaluable to them as parents'. They also commented that the meetings had been well chaired and facilitated.

A good matching tool has been developed to enhance the matching process. All matching meetings are now chaired by the adoption team manager.

Adopters prepare a book or DVD about themselves for use in preparing children or provide photographs for younger children. There is a written system in place for notifying the authority in the event of a serious illness or the death of an adopted. A system is also in place to notify the service, if circumstances in the birth family change.

The adoption panel has a clearly written set of policies and procedures, which govern its function and operation. These documents fully meet the adoption NMS and Regulations. Adopters are invited to attend the adoption panel, with good preparatory work undertaken with them, prior to their attendance. 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 effectively chaired. Panel members are well prepared, make appropriate observations and ask relevant questions. Panel minutes are informative, clearly state the panel's discussion, with reasons for the panel's conclusions and recommendations clearly recorded.

Adopters stated that both the chairperson and panel members 'welcomed' them and made 'real efforts to put them at ease'. They stated that the questions asked were 'relevant' and 'appropriate'.

The Agency Decision Maker (ADM) ensures all information relating to a case, including the panel minutes are thoroughly scrutinised before making a decision. Notifications of the decision are personally signed by the ADM and sent out within the necessary timescales.

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 in need and permanence teams have variable experience in adoption work, however, they have access to more experienced colleagues, adoption social workers and the guidance documents prepared by the adoption team. Staff are positive in their comments about the adoption team manager and workers, clearly valuing their expertise and the support provided.

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.

These support services are available to adopters both before and after the adoption order. They are individually tailored to meet the family's assessed needs and provided in a creative and flexible way. This support can range from informal support from the worker to more complex work, including therapeutic input, if needed.

Support services available, includes support from staff during the introduction and placement of a child with their adoptive family. Financial support packages are available, a news letter, which is produced twice a year and a buddy scheme for adopters. Social events are arranged for adoptive families and a support group. Internal and external training is available. In addition, Halton has commissioned a service from a voluntary adoption agency, which operates a support group for adopted young people.

The integration of the council's services has enabled adopters to access a variety of specialist services to meet specific needs, for example, involvement with the educational support team to address educational issues. It also allows a complex package of multi-agency support services to be provided to meet the holistic needs of the family.

In addition to these support services, Halton has commissioned the services of a voluntary agency, which provides a helpline, counselling and support groups and is available to all adopters and their children, who live in the area. It has also commissioned a voluntary agency, which specialises in inter-country adoption, to provide support to inter-country adopters.

Adopters are made aware of the support services available, at an early stage in their contact with the agency. Adoption placement plans and children's adoption care plans are well written. Adoption support plans are 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 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 the educational psychologist. The range of specialist services available, ensures adopters receive appropriate support, at all stages of the adoption process.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

There is a clear, strategy in place in relation to work with birth parents and their families. The 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. At times their cooperation is difficult to maintain, however, it is clear that every effort is made to address this and engage birth parents in this care planning process. Views of birth parents are sought and recorded in child permanence reports, which is very carefully monitored by managers. Birth parents views are also always fully discussed and considered, before the adoption panel makes any recommendations regarding their children's future.

The agency has 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 at various stages of the adoption process. The service makes real efforts to ensure support is provided to birth parents and their families at an early stage, for example, when an adoption plan is being considered for their child. Birth parents and their families are able to access this service at any time and the work 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.

Halton is extremely committed to gathering information about children's backgrounds and encouraging birth families to contribute to their child's heritage. They fully recognise the importance of ensuring life story work is undertaken with a child and the work is carried out in a timely manner and to a high standard. The life story books produced contain qualitative information, so ensuring the child has clear and appropriate information about their life before adoption.

Contact arrangements are well recorded. Direct contact is usually managed by the adopters; however, Halton 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. It is evident that adopters are prepared for one off meetings with birth parents and understand the value of maintaining letterbox contact. Assistance is provided to adopters and birth families in writing the letters. 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 promotion of equality and diversity is good. Promoting equality and non-discriminatory runs through policies and is carried out in practice. Assessments of prospective adopters provide a good consideration of 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 and provides effective adoption support for children with complex needs. Work with birth parents is carried out in a way that demonstrates respect and endeavours to engage them in the planning for their children.

The adoption service carries out its various tasks and responsibilities effectively and

efficiently. Its statement of purpose is up-to-date and clearly details its aims, objectives and the services provided. The statement of purpose is supported by a range of policies and procedures, which informs and underpins the operations and strategic direction of the agency.

The service has two 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, attractively presented, does not discriminate and clearly reflects the service's 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 extremely committed to the service. Staff speak highly of them and indicate that the adoption service is effectively led and well managed.

There are clear written procedures and systems for monitoring the adoption service's performance. However, these quality assurance systems are not robust, for example in respect of contact plans.

The service is staffed with a group of workers who are able to demonstrate skill, knowledge and experience of working with children and adoption. They receive regular, good quality supervision and are encouraged and well supported in their work by a committed manager and senior practitioner. Staff are clear about the structure of the service, its lines of accountability and communication. They also have a good understanding of their roles, responsibilities and who deputises, in the absence of their manager.

The management of the service's work is carried out in an efficient and equitable manner; with staff's interests, knowledge, skills and expertise being used in determining its allocation. The administrative support provided is of a good standard, which enables staff to carry out their work effectively and efficiently.

The service gives a high priority to training. Staff are encouraged and enabled to take up any training and development opportunities provided. Staff are very positive about the range of training and professional development opportunities provided, which they state are of a good standard.

There are appropriate policies and procedures in place for case recording. Case records are well organised and maintained. The majority of records contained full, up-to-date and accurate information, however this is not so in every case. Decisions by supervisors are recorded on case files and they are audited on a frequent basis.

The overall 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, secure manner.

Personnel files and panel members' files were well ordered, securely stored and contained 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 and are fit for purpose.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- improve the health and safety checklist for prospective adopters (NMS 4)
- ensure robust quality assurance systems are implemented and maintained for all aspects of the adoption service (breach of regulation 7(1)(a)(b) and 2 of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003)
- ensure all adoption records are accurate (NMS25).