

Tameside MBC Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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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

Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council has an adoption service, which undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. Its dedicated adoption team consists of a variety of staff, who provide a comprehensive adoption service. Their 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 planning and preparation of children for adoption. It also undertakes the matching, introduction and placement of children with domestic adopters, and supports adoption placements. A letter box system is operated and maintained, which supports the exchange of information in adoption placements.

Post adoption support is provided to all those, whose lives have been touched by adoption, which includes birth records counselling. While the agency does not provide an intermediary service, it will provide advice to those wishing to trace their family or children. It also provides information regarding agencies that provide an intermediary service. 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 service'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, which were judged as good.

The adoption service promotes and safeguards the welfare of children placed for adoption, through its rigorous approach to the assessment of families and the effective matching of children with them. This is undertaken by an experienced managerial team and staff, who exercise their responsibilities with skill and judgement. They are supported in this by the adoption panel and the agency decision maker, who carefully scrutinise all the papers presented to them. However, agency decisions and notifications of these decisions are not consistently addressed in a timely manner. Contractual arrangements are in place for the assessment and support of inter-country adopters.

The service provides a range of adoption support services, which are designed to provide good and effective support to adoptive families. All adoption support services are based on a person's assessed needs, with services specifically designed to meet these needs.

The service works hard to engage birth parents in the care planning process, encouraging them to provide information about their child's backgrounds and to contribute to the child's heritage. Life story work is carried out in a timely manner and the life story book produced to a good standard. Staff have worked hard to improve the quality of child permanence reports (CPRS) but this an area for development. Later life letters are also produced for every adopted child, however, these are not of a consistent standard. There are contractual arrangements 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.

A birth records counselling and access to files service is provided to adopted adults. Respect and equality is provided to all those involved in the adoption process.

The adoption service is well managed, with good outcomes achieved for adopted children and young people. However, case records do not always meet national minimum standards (NMS). In addition, the children's guide does not contain all the required regulatory information.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last full inspection was carried out in January 2007 and resulted in 5 actions and 5 recommendations being made. These related to staying safe and organisation, which are two of the key outcome areas. The service has addressed these matters, with the result that all the actions and recommendations had been completed.

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 Tameside 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 to 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. However, childcare workers 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 made in a timely manner. 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, large sibling groups and children with disabilities. Children's views are taken into account wherever possible when family finding.

Childcare workers in the adoption team are involved with children, where adoption is the plan, at a very early stage in the adoption process. This enables the workers to get to know their children extremely well and enhances the family finding and matching process. The effectiveness of this system is demonstrated by the timely way potential families are identified for children and this together with profiling and planning meetings, ensures children are matched with families who meet their needs. 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 the children talk with adopters or attend meetings to provide full information. The agency has had no disruptions in the past two years, demonstrating a successful approach to careful and considered matching.

There are clear processes and procedures to handle adoption enquiries and applications from domestic adopters, which are compatible with the agency's equal opportunities and anti-discriminatory practice. Inter-country adopters are referred to a voluntary adoption agency, which Tameside has commissioned to provide this specialist service. Adopters stated that the service's website was 'good'. In contacting the agency they had received 'a warm, welcoming and helpful response to their enquiry'. Written information regarding the adoption process had been sent to them 'speedily' and was 'very informative' and effectively met their needs.

There is a formal preparation, assessment and approval process of domestic adopters. Preparation training is provided in collaboration with another adoption agency. This enables preparation groups to be held on a regular basis and ensures adopters can attend a group without too long a wait. 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. In addition, the service has also made arrangements for those wishing to adopt a child from overseas to attend inter-

country preparation groups, which are provided by a voluntary adoption agency.

Adopters spoke positively about the preparation training stating that it was 'well organised and presented'. The training materials used were said to be 'informative', 'honest', 'realistic' 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 also said that the preparation training had been 'very enlightening' and provided them with a sound foundation to explore all aspects of adoption.

Adopters' assessments are of good quality, evidence based and largely analytical. The assessments are comprehensive and cover all the necessary issues, such as loss, life experiences, diversity, parenting capacity and support networks well. In situations, where there are other children in the family, there are good examples of thorough, direct work being carried out to obtain their views regarding adoption. These views are well recorded and are shown to older children, so they can comment on their accuracy. 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. The service has introduced an effective system to monitor the timescales of adopters' assessments. Adopters' assessments are usually 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 receive their written assessment prior to panel to check for accuracy and to make comments. Adopters stated that their report was 'a realistic and accurate picture' of them and 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.

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.

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 recorded.

Adopters stated that both the chairperson and panel members 'welcomed' them and 'did their best to put them at ease'. The majority of adopters 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. However, agency decisions and notifications are not always addressed consistently and within the specified timescales. Notifications of the decision though are personally signed by the ADM, which clearly reflects their importance.

Staff recruitment practices are robust, which ensures children are effectively protected. The manager and all staff working within the adoption service are appropriately qualified and have considerable experience, knowledge and skills in adoption work. Staff are extremely positive about the adoption team, hold them in high regard and clearly value their expertise.

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. Consequently, a clear, coherent, adoption support strategy and comprehensive range of support services for adopters have 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 to more complex work, including therapeutic input, if needed.

Services available, includes support from staff during the introduction and placement of a child with their adoptive family. Financial support packages, for example, settling-in grants and adoption allowances. A news letter is produced twice a year and the agency has a regular support group for adopters. There is also a weekly post adoption surgery. The service arranges a Christmas and summer social event for adoptive families. Internal and external training is available.

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 resources team to address educational issues. They also have an

excellent relationship with the children and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) and have access to two full-time senior mental health social workers, who are linked to the local CAMHS. These two workers operate an attachment group, which adopters can access, if required. In addition, one worker is linked to the adoption team and holds regular consultation surgeries for social workers and this can be extended to adopters. There is also good access to CAMHS for adoptive families, if required. The ability to provide adoptive families with complex packages of multi-agency support enables adoptive families to be well supported and assists children to remain in their home.

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 of a good standard. The plans were signed by all necessary parties and had been distributed in a timely manner. 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. Written protocols are 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 or the educational adviser. The range of specialist services available, ensures adopters receive appropriate support, at all stages of the adoption process.

People affected by adoption receive a service that is appropriate and tailored to their particular need. They are treated fairly, openly, respectfully and sensitively. Written policies are carried out in practice by experienced workers, who respond promptly to adoption enquiries or service requests.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

There is a clear, strategy in place regarding 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 the CPR'S and these are acted upon if they are appropriate for the child's needs. In situations where it is not possible to obtain their views, the reasons for this are fully recorded. Once a match has been agreed, there is an opportunity for the birth and adoptive parents to meet. These meetings are carefully prepared for, sensitively handled and well managed.

The agency has a contract with a voluntary adoption agency to offer independent support and counselling to birth parents and families. 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. Written

information regarding this service is also provided at various stages of the adoption process. Birth parents and their families are able to access this service at any time and the work is carried out in an extremely thoughtful, sensitive manner. This contract is carefully monitored to ensure that it provides a qualitative service and value for money.

The service is 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 use such work to prepare a child for adoption. The work is carried out to a good standard and in a timely manner. The life story books produced contain comprehensive information, so ensuring the child has clear and appropriate information about their life before adoption. Latter life letters are also completed, however, while some letters were well-written, this was not true in every case.

Since the last inspection, the authority has worked extremely hard to improve the quality of the CPR. CPR training has been provided to staff and all reports are quality assured by the team manager or her deputy. However, while considerable improvements in the CPR have been effected, these assessments are still of variable quality, for example, some are written in an inappropriate style, contain jargon and provide limited information regarding the birth parents.

Contact arrangements are well recorded. Direct contact is usually managed by the adopters; however, Tameside 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, well managed system. 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 birth records counselling and access to files. These services are provided to a good standard, with learning gained from this work 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 practice is firmly embedded in the service's policies, procedures and practice. All people who are interested in becoming adoptive parents are welcomed with out prejudice, treated openly, fairly and respectfully. Children are carefully matched with families that reflect their heritage. Every effort is made to ensure their heritage is maintained, for example, all children have memory boxes, life story work

and books are completed. Work with birth parents is carried out in a way that demonstrates respect and every effort is made to engage them in planning for their child's future.

The adoption service has an up-to-date Statement of Purpose (SOP), which quite clearly details its aims, objectives and the services provided. This document is supported by a range of policies and procedures, which inform and underpin the operations and strategic direction of the agency.

The service has three children's guides, which can be produced in a variety of formats to meet children's differing needs. They are attractively presented and written in a child friendly form. However, they do not contain all the information required, for example, they do not contain the name, address and telephone number of the Children's Rights Director.

Adopters are provided with well written, comprehensive information regarding the adoption process, which is sent out in a timely way. This literature is attractively presented, does not discriminate and clearly reflects the service's practice. A system is in place to prioritise the assessment of prospective adopters, who are most likely to meet the needs of children waiting to be adopted and this is effectively communicated to adopters.

The adoption service is well led and managed. The managerial team is skilled and extremely experienced and they demonstrate a deep understanding of meeting children's needs through adoption. The senior management team that ensures adoption is an integral part of the wider children's services. There is a committed executive, which keeps itself well informed of the service's activities.

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 undertake their work in a conscientious manner and with commitment, often 'going the extra mile' to ensure that work is completed satisfactorily. They receive regular, good quality supervision and are well supported by their manager. 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, as well as who deputises, in the absence of the 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 used to determine 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 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, maintained and ordered in line with file index. The majority of records were of a good standard, however, some records were not unsigned and undated. Decisions by supervisors are recorded on case files and files are audited.

There is a clearly written policy and procedure in place for accessing records, which meet the legislative requirements and is carefully followed. The service ensures that separate records are kept for staff and any allegations or complaints made. These records are well maintained and securely stored.

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):

- ensure the system used to record statutory checks meets the Guidance relating to the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (NMS 4)
- ensure agency decisions and written notifications of this decision are made in a timely manner (NMS 13)
- improve the quality of child permanence reports and ensure later life letters are of a consistent qualitative standard (NMS 8)
- ensure the children's guide contains all the information required (breach of regulation 3(1) of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003)
- ensure all case records are signed and dated by the author. (NMS 27)