

# Warrington Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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| <b>Date of last inspection</b> | 19/02/2007   |

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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

Warrington Metropolitan Borough Council has a dedicated adoption team, which 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, placement of children with domestic adopters and the support of adoption placements. In addition post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption is provided, which includes 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 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. In the main, the adoption service was meeting the adoption national minimum standards and regulations. The outcome areas of staying safe and organisation were judged as satisfactory and making a positive contribution and enjoying and achieving were judged as good.

The adoption service has a recruitment strategy, which is based on an awareness of the children requiring adoption. However, the current strategy has not resulted in a sufficiently diverse group of adopters being recruited to the service.

The service's practice is child focused. It is usually thorough in its approach to the recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters and makes every effort to ensure children are kept safe. Care and thought is given to the effective matching of children and adopters. A good range of accessible, support services are provided to adopters, both pre- and post adoption order. These services enable families to receive the necessary support, so they can provide their children with a permanent and stable home.

The service recognises the lifelong implications of adoption and the importance of

maintaining a child's heritage. Efforts are made to engage birth parents in the care planning process and enable them to contribute to their child's future. This greatly assists in ensuring children have a well-recorded background. However, whilst life story work is undertaken, this work is not completed for every child or in a timely manner. There is a well-managed letterbox system and assistance with letterbox contact is available. A counselling and intermediary service is provided to adopted adults and birth relatives. All those affected by the adoption process are respected, valued and receive an individually tailored service.

Both the management and staff team have knowledge and experience in adoption. However, the recruitment and quality assurance systems are not sufficiently robust, particularly in relation to the adoption panel members and agency records.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

The last full inspection was carried out in February 2007 and resulted in six actions and five recommendations being made. These related to each of the key outcome areas. The service had made considerable efforts to address these matters, but two actions and one recommendation remained outstanding. One of the actions related to life work training for staff and for this work to be carried out in a timely manner. The second action related to enhancing the quality of children's written assessments. The one outstanding recommendation related to agency records.

### **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 adoption service has a recruitment strategy, which is based on an awareness of children requiring adoption. The service is aware though of the need to recruit a more diverse group of adopters to improve placement choice. Since Warrington 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 adoption manager is involved in this consortium and the team has access to database information about children and families. The service is child focused and in situations where it is necessary to meet children's needs outside the region, arrangements are in place to secure funding without delay. The National Adoption Register (NAR) is used and the service also takes part in adoption exchange days to facilitate an effective match of a child with adopters.

Childcare workers in the adoption team are involved with children, who have an

adoption plan, at an early stage in the adoption process. This enables the workers to get to know their children and enhances the family finding and matching process. This system is effective and adoption placements are generally made in a timely manner. 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. Introductions and placements are generally well managed. The adoption service has had two disruptions in adoption placements in the past four years. Both these occurred this year and disruption meetings were held. Any learning obtained from these disruptions is being used to inform future practice.

The authority has worked hard to improve the quality of the child permanence report. However, while some improvements in the child permanence report have been effected, these assessments are still of variable quality. Some are not comprehensive, written in an inappropriate style, contain jargon and provide limited information regarding the birth parents.

There are clear processes and procedures in place to handle domestic adoption enquiries and follow up any expressions of interest, which are compatible with the agency's equal opportunities and anti-discriminatory practice guidance. Inter-country adopters are referred to a voluntary adoption agency, which Warrington has commissioned to provide this specialist service. Adopters confirmed that the information they had received regarding the adoption process was useful and had met their needs.

The service has a formal preparation, assessment and approval process of domestic adopters. Preparation training is provided twice a year, however, adopters can attend the preparation training provided by other neighbouring authorities. This ensures training takes place frequently and effectively meeting adopters' needs. The training materials used fit within a framework of equal opportunities and address anti-discriminatory practice. Preparation training is tailored to meet the varying needs of adopters, for example, second time round adopters.

Adopters spoke positively about the preparation training, which they stated was 'well presented and organised' and 'informative'. Several adopters stated that the training enabled them to consider 'the reality of adopting' and had been 'invaluable'.

Adopters' assessments are generally comprehensive, analytical and cover all the necessary areas. In some cases though, all relevant issues were not fully explored. The service carries out written references in relation to the adopters, employer references and checks with applicants' former partners. 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.

Adopters commented positively about the assessment process. Staff were said to carry out their work in a 'professional', 'knowledgeable', 'skilled' and 'sensitive'

manner. All adopters have the assessment document prior to going to the adoption panel to check for accuracy and to make comments. Adopters stated that their report presented 'a realistic picture' of them and had been given them in the required legislative timescale.

Adopters receive written information regarding the matching, introductory and placement processes. Information is also provided regarding the National Adoption Register. This information is reinforced to adopters through out 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 child.

The adoption panel has a clearly written set of policies and procedures, which govern its function and operation. These documents fully meet the adoption national minimum standards and regulations. Adopters are invited to attend the adoption panel, with good preparatory work undertaken with them, prior to their attendance. The adoption 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'. 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.

Staff recruitment practices ensure children are effectively protected. The manager and staff working within the adoption service are appropriately qualified and have experience, knowledge and skills in childcare and adoption work. Staff in the children's services value the expertise of the adoption team and use them on a consultative basis.

There is a safeguarding policy and procedure, which meets the adoption national minimum standards and regulations. A good recording system is in place to enable staff to record safeguarding issues effectively. 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 has developed a range of pre and post adoption support services. These services are provided in a variety of ways, for example, in-house, through collaborative work with three neighbouring authorities; whilst others are provided in partnership with a local voluntary adoption agency.

Support services available, includes support from staff during the introduction and placement of a child with their adoptive family. A variety of financial support packages are available, a newsletter, which is produced twice a year. Social events are arranged for adoptive families, along with a regular support group and a monthly coffee morning. Internal and external training is also available. In addition, they have the opportunity to access a helpline, counselling service and other support groups through commissioning arrangements with a local voluntary adoption agency.

The service is also able to access other council services, for example, accessing and obtaining additional educational support for a child.

Inter-country adopters are also able to access Warrington'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 agency. Written information is also provided to adopters. Adoption support plans are generally of a good standard and these plans are reviewed, where ever necessary. Any requests for support are responded to 'promptly' and adopters indicated that they were 'well supported'. Adopters, who had not required support, stated that they were confident should such support be required in the future, it would be provided.

There are written protocols in place in relation to specialist advisors. The agency has access to specialist advisors, including medical and legal advisors, who are committed to achieving good outcomes for children through adoption. Both social workers and adopters were complimentary about their contacts with them.

There are appropriate systems in place for people affected by adoption to receive specific services according to assessed need. These services are provided in a thoughtful, sensitive manner and people are fully involved in any decisions affecting their life.

The adoption service ensures any service it commissions is supported by a written agreement. This contract is regularly reviewed to ensure it meets service users' needs.



## **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

The service is committed to working with birth parents and encourages them to be as involved as possible, in planning for their children's future. At times their cooperation is difficult to maintain, however, it is clear that efforts are made to address this and engage birth parents in this care planning process. Views of birth parents are sought and recorded in the child permanence report 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 generally recorded.

Warrington 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, with efforts made to ensure support is provided at an early stage, for example, when an adoption plan is being considered for their child. The service is accessible to birth parents and their families at any time and the work is carried out in a thoughtful and sensitive manner. This contract is monitored to ensure that it provides a good service and provides value for money.

The service has made recent improvements in gathering information about children's backgrounds and encouraging birth families to contribute to information about their child's heritage. The service is committed to ensuring life work is undertaken with every child with an adoption plan. This work has been effectively used to prepare children for adoption. However, such life work, including the production of life books, has not always been provided for every child or carried out in timely manner.

Contact arrangements are recorded. Direct contact is usually managed by the adopters; however, the service will provide adopters' support, where the arrangements are difficult or complex. Arrangements for indirect contact are managed through the letterbox system. This is a well managed system and it is evident that adopters 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 experiences and learning gained from this work used to inform adoption practice.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

## Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. Promoting equality and non-discriminatory practice is reflected in the policies and procedures. All people who are interested in becoming adoptive parents are welcomed with out prejudice, treated openly, fairly and respectfully. Children are matched with families that reflect the child's heritage. However, not all children have full information about their past and their family history.

The adoption agency has an up-to-date Statement of Purpose, which quite clearly details its aims, objectives and the services provided. This document is supported by a range of policies and procedures, which are available to staff.

The service has its own children's guide for younger children, which can be produced in a variety of formats to meet children's differing needs. This guide is attractively presented, written in a child-friendly form and contains all the information required.

Adopters are provided with comprehensive, well-written information about the adoption process, which is sent out in a timely way. This literature is welcoming, informative and is attractively presented.

There are systems for monitoring the activities of the adoption service. However, there is some variability regarding the effective operation of these, for example, the supervisory and appraisal system are carried out within appropriate timescales. File sampling and managerial scrutiny are not sufficiently robust.

The team manager has experience, knowledge and skills in adoption work. Staff are positive about their manager and indicate that they are well supported in their work. Lines of accountability, responsibilities and levels of delegation are in place and are known to the staff. Staff in the adoption team have the knowledge and experience to effectively carry out adoption work. They are enthusiastic about their work, are open to new ideas and improving outcomes for children. Staff spoke positively about the range of training and professional development opportunities provided them. Administrative staff work exceedingly hard to support their professional colleagues, however, insufficient resources impacts on the service.

There are appropriate policies and procedures in place for case recording. Case records are electronic, however, they are not well organised and maintained. Some records were not comprehensive, up-to-date, legible or signed and dated by the author. Some records did not contain decisions by the supervisor and there was limited evidence of managerial oversight in relation to the records. Some records breach confidentiality, as they contain information about other adopters and children.

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

These records are well maintained and securely stored.

Personnel and adoption panel members' files are well ordered and securely stored. Panel members' files contain most of the required information, though they did not contain documentary evidence of panel members' qualifications.

The service's premises are well located, accessible and are fit for purpose. The arrangements for the office security is well managed and is suitably equipped with information technology equipment and communication systems.

## **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 an effective recruitment strategy is developed and implemented to meet the needs of those children with an adoption plan (NMS2)
- improve the quality of child permanence reports and ensure all relevant staff receive training in their completion (NMS 5)
- ensure life work and books are completed in a timely manner for all children with an adoption plan (NMS 8)
- 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 the executive side of the council receives written reports on the management and outcomes of the adoption agency every six months to be able to monitor progress (NMS17)
- ensure there are sufficient administrative resources within the service (NMS 21)
- ensure all agency records are comprehensive, legible, signed and dated by the author and contain decisions by supervisors (NMS25)
- ensure there are no breaches of confidentiality in agency records (NMS 26)
- ensure that the system to monitor the quality and adequacy of records is used in a consistent manner (NMS 27)
- ensure all the required information relating to the adoption service's panel members are obtained. (breach of regulation 6(2)(c) of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003.