

Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council 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

Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council has a dedicated adoption team, which includes a post adoption social worker, who focuses 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. The Council has commissioned a similar service for inter-country adopters from a voluntary adoption agency.

The service carries out the matching, introduction and placement of children with domestic adopters and the support of adoption placements. Post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption is also provided. It also operates and maintains a letter box system, which supports the exchange of information in adoption placements. In addition, the service commissions a birth records' counselling and intermediary service, as well as a birth parent's independent counselling and support service from an adoption support 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 national minimum standards (NMS) for adoption agencies and services. 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 was 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 which ensures 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. However, the child permanence reports are of variable quality.

Adoption support services are based on a person's assessed needs and services are effectively designed to meet them. All those affected by the adoption process are respected, valued and receive an individually tailored service.

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

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, when it is in the child's best interests to do so. There is a letterbox system and assistance with letterbox contact is available.

The adoption policies, procedures and the literature for adopters have been revised in accordance with current adoption legislation. These documents promote equality and diversity and this is reflected in the service's practice.

The managerial team have considerable child care and adoption experience. It is a well-managed service, with good, effective administrative systems supporting their work. Case records are generally of a good standard, however, a small percentage breach confidentiality, are not accurate, signed or dated by the author.

The recruitment and selection process is robust and safeguards children.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last full inspection was carried out in February 2008 and resulted in four recommendations being made. These related to three of the key outcome areas, staying safe, enjoying and achieving and organisation.

The service had made considerable efforts to address these matters. Panel minute extracts and detailed contemporaneous records are now on case files. A post adoption support strategy has been developed. However, one recommendation relating to child permanence reports remains unfulfilled.

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 Barnsley is a small local authority geographically, the majority of children are placed outside the

area. Positive, effective working relationships exist between the adoption service, their neighbouring authorities and the local adoption consortium. This greatly increases the service's ability to match children with adopters. The service is child focussed 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.

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. 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 large sibling groups. Children's views are taken into account wherever possible when family finding. 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 only had two disruptions in the past six years which demonstrates a successful approach to careful and considered matching.

The authority has worked hard to improve the quality of the child permanence reports and staff have been provided with relevant training. However, although there has been significant improvement there is still some variability in their quality. For example, some are written in an inappropriate style and provide limited information regarding the birth parents.

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 Barnsley has commissioned to provide this specialist service. All adopters confirmed that they had received prompt and useful information regarding the adoption process.

There is a formal preparation, assessment and approval process of domestic adopters. Preparation training takes place frequently and effectively meets adopters' needs. The training materials used fit within a framework of equal opportunities and address anti-discriminatory practice. Adopters spoke extremely positively about the preparation training which they stated was well presented, informative and the start of a journey into adoption.

Adopters' assessments are comprehensive, analytical and cover all the necessary areas. 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. However, this health and safety checklist is not comprehensive.

Adopters are positive 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 NAR. This information is reinforced to adopters through out the adoption process.

Adopters prepare information about themselves in a variety of ways, which is used to prepare children for adoption. 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 and good preparatory work is 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 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.

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 their adoption colleagues and use them on a consultative basis.

There is a safeguarding policy and procedure, which complies with the 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 fully recognises the importance of providing support to adopters in maintaining stable and permanent homes for children. Efforts are therefore made to ensure that adopters retain their social worker following their approval. This arrangement continues throughout the matching, introductions and placement of children, until at least the adoption order is made.

A variety of 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 the worker's informal support to more complex work, including therapeutic input, if needed.

Support services available include support from staff during the introduction and placement of a child with their adoptive family, financial support packages, a news letter and a support group. Internal and external training is also available. The integration of the council's services has also enabled adopters to access a variety of specialist services to meet specific needs, for example, involvement with the life chances' team to address educational and health issues. In addition to these support services, Barnsley has commissioned a voluntary agency to provide an inter-country adoption service to those people wishing to adopt a child from overseas.

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 are signed by all necessary parties and distributed in a timely way. Requests for support are responded to promptly and services are provided in a sensitive and thoughtful manner.

The service has access to a variety of specialist advisers and there are written protocols in place regarding their roles. Specialist advisers are used to support adopters, for example, adopters are able to see the medical adviser and educational psychologists, if required. The services ability to access a range of specialist services 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 the care planning process. Views of birth parents are sought and recorded in child permanence reports, and are acted upon, if they are appropriate to a child's needs. In situations where it is not possible to obtain their views the reasons for this are generally recorded.

The agency has a contract with an adoption support 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. Real efforts are made 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 work is carried out in a thoughtful and sensitive manner. This contract is carefully monitored so that it provides a qualitative service and value for money.

The service 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 work is undertaken with a child to a high standard and in a timely manner. The life story books produced contain qualitative information and ensures a 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, additional support will be provided if arrangements are difficult or complex. Indirect contact is managed through the letter box system. This is a robust system and is managed in an effective and efficient manner. It is evident that adopters are well 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 service commissions an adoption support agency to provide a birth records counselling and intermediary service.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service ensures that the promotion of equality and diversity is reflected in their policies and in their practice. Prospective adopters' assessments address the applicants' views on disability, ethnicity and culture, both in terms of the types of children they are being assessed to adopt and 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 demonstrates their respect for them and every effort is made to involve them in planning for their children's future.

The adoption service has an up-to-date Statement of Purpose which clearly details the aims, objectives and the services provided. This document is supported by a range of policies and procedures which inform and underpin the strategic and operational direction of the agency. The service has a colourful, attractively-presented children's guide which is in a user-friendly format and contains 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 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 team manager has considerable experience, knowledge and skills. Staff are positive about him and complimentary about his leadership and management 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. 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.

There are clearly written procedures and systems for monitoring the adoption service's performance, which are largely effective.

The service places an importance on staff training and they are actively encouraged and enabled to take up any training and development opportunities available. Staff are very positive about this and state that training provided is of a good standard and meets their needs. Administrative staff work exceedingly hard to support their professional colleagues and ensure an effective adoption service is provided.

There are appropriate policies and procedures in place for case recording. Case records are well organised, comprehensive and up to date. Decisions by supervisors are recorded on case files and files are audited on a frequent basis. However, some records were not accurate, nor were they signed and dated by the author. In a small percentage of cases, there was also a breach of confidentiality as they contained information relating to another person.

There is a clearly written policy and procedure in place for accessing records, which meet the legislative requirements. 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 panel members files are well ordered, securely stored and contain all the required information.

The premises occupied by the agency are well located. Arrangements for the security and administration of the agency are well managed and it is suitably equipped with information technology and all necessary resources.

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)
- develop a more consistent approach to the writing of child permanence reports (NMS 5)
- ensure all agency records are accurate, signed and dated by the author (NMS 25)
- ensure there are no breaches of confidentiality in agency records. (NMS 26)