

City of Bradford MDC Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Stephen Smith
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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

The City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities relating to adoption. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters. The council commissions a similar service for those wishing to adopt from overseas from a voluntary adoption agency.

The service carries out the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters and supports adoptive placements. It also provides post-adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, including the maintenance of an adoption letterbox, birth records counselling and intermediary work. 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 service. The purpose of the inspection was to assess its compliance with the adoption national minimum standards. All the standards were inspected under the outcome areas of staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and organisation. The adoption service's promotion of equality and diversity was also inspected. During the inspection, inspectors had contact with seven adopted children, in person or by questionnaire, although their young age meant that detailed consultation was not possible.

This is a strong adoption service that undertakes its functions with a clear focus on providing good outcomes for children through adoption. It is well managed, both strategically and operationally and demonstrates clear plans for ongoing development. The service provides prospective adopters with very good information and training. It undertakes careful and robust assessments of their suitability to adopt although it does not assess potential risks from family pets as well as it could.

Children are matched with adopters who are suitable to meet their needs. Planning arrangements within the authority are good. This means that contingency plans for adoption are developed early which helps reduce delays for children. Good information is provided about children when adoption plans are being considered which helps ensure children are placed with closely matched families. The adoption panel is robust in scrutinising assessments and plans for children. It makes very clear recommendations along with the reasons for these and this contributes very effectively to the decision-making process. However, siblings tend to be the subject

of one panel recommendation and, later, decision by the authority. This means that records of the decisions taken about each specific child are not always available individually for later life reference

Life story work for children is often not undertaken in a timely manner and books produced are of inconsistent quality. The authority has plans and systems to improve this situation. However, this work has not yet had a significant impact.

The authority provides strong and creative support to people affected by adoption. Support for children and their adoptive families is provided based on their individual assessed needs and the service works effectively with other agencies to deliver this support. The authority works hard to support the birth parents of children being adopted.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection a number of recommendations were made to improve the adoption service.

The authority was asked to develop a permanency policy for children and to evaluate preparation training to ensure that adoption focused on the need to find adoptive families for the authority's children. It was also asked to review its adoption support work and to promote support services provided to birth families more effectively. The adoption service has acted on these recommendations robustly.

The authority was also asked to improve its arrangements for life story work and the production of life story books for children being adopted. The service has taken action to respond to these matters but they remain not fully addressed.

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 service has an effective and successful adoptive parent recruitment strategy. It has systems in place to identify the sorts of people needed to meet the needs of children who may require adoptive families. The suitability of people to adopt is considered on an inclusive basis irrespective of their race, sexuality disability or marital status.

The preparation, training and assessment of prospective adopters are undertaken with care, thoroughness and attention to detail. There can be some delay for applicants at differing stages of the process but the service is aware of this and is

considering how best to resolve this situation. Thorough checks on the suitability and competence of prospective adopters take place. However, assessments of any potential risks posed to children by pets within adoptive families are not well enough or widely enough assessed to minimise the risk of harm to a child. Assessment reports are well written, evaluative and reflect the process that adopters have undertaken. This provides the adoption panel with the necessary information on which to make its recommendations on the suitability of applicants. Preparation training includes input from adoptive parents, birth parents and foster carers and is highly regarded by adopters. As a consequence, prospective adopters for the authority are well prepared to adopt children.

The authority operates a planning process which seeks to identify, at an early stage, those children for whom there may be a contingency plan for adoption. This enables plans to be developed early and potential matches to be considered. It also informs the adopter recruitment strategy of the needs of children who may need adoptive families in the future. Adoption and field social work staff liaise effectively to find adoptive families and arrange matches between children and adopters. The authority works closely with the local adoption consortium to find adoptive parents for children for whom there are no appropriate adopters locally. It refers to the adoption register as necessary. There is a clear, structured and well-recorded process in place to make these matching decisions. This leads to the authority's strong record of successful adoptions.

The authority will not make decisions about whether a child should be placed for adoption or matched with prospective adopters without full information. Child permanence reports are generally of good quality with the information recorded in an appropriately accessible manner for consideration by children in later life. The adoption panel is correctly constituted and well managed. It undertakes its responsibilities with commitment and rigour. It is thorough in its consideration of reports submitted and makes clear recommendations with the reasons for these clearly recorded. The administration of the panel enables business to be conducted in a timely way. This means that delay for children is minimised. Decision making is prompt and shows a thoroughness which ensures children have the most suitable placements in adoptive families.

However, in situations where panel is considering whether siblings should be placed for adoption it often records its deliberations in relation to the siblings rather than each individual child. Often, in these situations only one recommendation is made relating to the sibling group. The agency decision is also often recorded in the same manner. This means that, in later life, individual children will not have reference to a record of the detailed discussion and decision that took place specifically in relation to them.

The authority's recruitment procedures are robust and ensure that all staff members who work for the purposes of the adoption service are suitable people with the appropriate qualifications to carry out their roles. The managers and staff of the agency are all suitably experienced and provide sound operational leadership and practice. Adoption staff understand adoption and social work with children. They

know the legislative framework, the impact it has on children's lives and clearly focus on promoting the well-being of children.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Support to people affected by adoption is an important and significant aspect of the service's operation. The authority's arrangements for supporting adoptive placements are effective. It provides children and adopters with good support throughout the introduction process and ensures that placements are well reviewed and supported. Adoption placement plans and children's adoption support plans are well written and comprehensive. The service ensures that arrangements to delegate parental responsibility to prospective adopters are also clearly agreed and recorded.

There is a clear understanding of the importance that support plays in the drive for successful outcomes. The service makes considerable efforts to ensure that adopters are supported and equipped to manage and understand the complex and challenging needs of children. The service provides a range of flexible and individually tailored support strategies. These help adopted children to settle into their new families and cope with difficulties they may experience. Adoption support assessments are of good quality and regularly reviewed. Support work is creative and based on the needs of individuals. For example, therapy input can be provided, direct work can take place or financial support given to access groups and activities that will help maintain placements.

The letterbox arrangements for maintaining contact between adopted children and their birth families are managed effectively despite the large number of contacts handled by this letterbox. Post-adoption support, including birth records counselling, is undertaken jointly with a voluntary agency. This work is based on effective arrangements and procedures that ensure support is available when requested.

Specialist advice and support resources are readily accessible. Medical advice and support provided to the agency and adopters are of excellent quality and are readily available to inform all areas of adoption decision making. Legal advice is always provided at panel. Other resources and specialist services are sourced whenever necessary.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The service recognises the significance of children's backgrounds and histories. It understands the significance they have in children's understanding of themselves and their place in the world. It works hard throughout the adoption process to encourage and enable birth parents to be involved in, and contribute to, the planning for their children's futures.

The adoption service makes significant efforts to support all people who have been affected by adoption, including birth families. Support to birth families is provided by children's social workers as part of their everyday work. More formal support arrangements are provided through an independent service contracted by the authority. This helps to ensure that birth parents still receive support during parts of the adoption process that are difficult and distressing for them. Birth parents are also encouraged and assisted to provide information about themselves and their families to help adopted children understand their backgrounds. Birth parents are helped, where necessary, to write letters for the letterbox and encouraged to maintain contact in line with the contact agreement. The authority's letterbox arrangements are effective and this results in more consistent contact between children and their birth families.

The agency regards life story work for children being adopted as important. It has developed a comprehensive policy regarding this work. This sets out how good quality work is to be managed in a timely manner. At the last inspection the responsibilities for this work and how it was to be carried out were unclear. This is not the case now and the authority is developing a range of resources and materials to assist social workers to complete this work. The authority's policy makes clear how the completion and quality of this work will be prioritised and monitored. However, the focus of this work has not yet had sufficient impact. Life story books are of inconsistent quality and are often not ready to pass on to adopters in a sufficiently timely manner. For example, during the inspection it was noted that two adopters had not received children's life story books despite the adoption order being made some time ago. This means that these children and their adopters are not getting the help they may need to make sense of their history in a sufficiently timely manner. Later life letters for children are completed more reliably and are of generally good quality. Child permanence reports contain good information about children's backgrounds and family circumstances that is generally presented in an accessible manner. Commendably, many foster carers provide adopters with excellent memory boxes containing information, mementos and photographs of children's lives with them. This helps add to children's understanding of their past.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. All the elements of the service's practice have a strong focus on valuing diversity and promoting equality. The service recruits adopters from a diverse range of backgrounds to meet the different needs of children who need adoptive families. Assessments of prospective adopters provide a thorough consideration of applicants' abilities to respect and

promote diversity and to bring children up in a non-discriminatory manner. Information for adopters and preparation training and events are provided in different languages which reflect the needs of local communities. A clear focus is maintained on meeting the specific needs of adopters from different communities, including those of Asian adopters, in order to provide a range of adopters for the authority's children. The service works hard to ensure that children are matched with adopters who are able to meet their needs and where possible reflect their background and heritage. The service's staff team is representative of the ethnic composition of the city. Most impressively, this emphasis on equality and diversity is completely embedded in the authority's adoption practice. It underpins all it does and promotes a strong focus on meeting individual children's needs through adoption.

The organisation has a Statement of Purpose in place which accurately sets out the service it provides. It is appropriately reviewed and updated as necessary. The children's guide is made available for children for whom adoption is the plan. It is intended as a tool for adults to use with children to help them understand the adoption process. This guide has been developed with input from adopted children.

The agency has an effective recruitment strategy that sets out its eligibility criteria and makes clear the needs of children looking for adoptive families. This strategy is based upon information about the needs of children waiting or for whom adoption may be the plan. This process allows the agency to prioritise adopters who can best meet the needs of the children needing families. The service responds to enquiries promptly and provides good information and counselling for prospective adopters.

The management of the adoption service, at both operational and strategic levels, is effective. It is focused on delivering positive outcomes for children through adoption. Managers understand how adoption fits into the overall context of children's social care. Management and support for staff are of good quality. Effective workload management ensures that the key functions of the adoption service are prioritised to minimise delay for children. Adoption staff and their managers are committed to their roles and work creatively and enthusiastically. The service provides its staff with very good direct support. Training and development opportunities for staff are good with access to both internal and external training courses. The management and monitoring of the agency's activities are robust and this results in a strong service that provides good outcomes for children.

Case recording supports the work done with children and adopters. Records are now largely held electronically and provide clear information about work done and decisions made. Effective arrangements exist to ensure that any records relating to children's adoption are maintained with appropriate confidentiality. The agency operates from suitable premises with appropriate storage arrangements in place. Archived files are stored securely and a risk assessment is in place to monitor these arrangements.

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 that assessments consider all potential risks present within prospective adopters' homes. Specifically, that risk assessments are undertaken in respect of any pet which may present a risk to an adopted child (NMS 4.6)
- ensure that panel recommendations and agency decisions are made in respect of each individual child for whom adoption decisions are being made (NMS 13.1)
- ensure that good quality life story books are prepared in a timely manner for all children. (NMS 8.2)