

Salford City 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

Salford City Council's adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with adoption 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. Salford also commissions some post adoption support services and intermediary work from a voluntary adoption agency. The service operates and maintains a letterbox system, which supports the exchange of information in adoption placements. An independent counselling and support service is also 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 announced inspection considered all the national minimum standards under the four outcome areas of staying safe, enjoying and achieving, positive contribution and organisation. Enjoying and achieving was judged as outstanding and all other outcome areas were judged as good.

The service has a recruitment strategy, which promotes equality and diversity and is clearly based on an awareness of the children requiring adoption. It is an extremely child-focused service and all policies, procedures and practices are designed to ensure the best outcomes are achieved for children. The service is extremely good at recruiting adopters. It is thorough in its approach to the recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters and strives to ensure children are kept safe. However applications are taken after preparation training which is not in accordance with the adoption guidance. The service gives a great deal of thought and care is given to the matching and placement of children with adopters.

An excellent range of in-house, multi-agency and external support services is provided to adopters, both before and after the adoption order has been made. This support is extremely well thought out and is effective in keeping families together.

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. However life story work is not always carried out in a timely manner and life story books, as well as child permanence reports, are not of a consistent 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 service is well managed operationally and strategically. Both the management and staff team have considerable knowledge and experience in adoption. They demonstrate a real enthusiasm in their work and are committed to providing a qualitative, child-focused service. Good administrative systems support their work. Quality assurance systems used by the service though are not sufficiently robust. However, there are effective recruitment and selection processes in place which safeguard children.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last full inspection of the city of Salford's adoption service was carried out on 9th May 2008 and five recommendations for improvement were made. The service had made efforts to address these matters and has ensured life story work and the production of a life story book are produced in a timely manner. However, life story books are not of a consistent standard. There is also variability in the quality of child permanence reports. While the service has improved its quality assurance systems in relation to agency records, there continues to be some shortfalls. Improvements have been made in the telephone verification of references and this is now clearly evidenced. The service has a disaster recovery plan. All agency records are now stored securely and in a manner to minimise the risk of damage from fire and flood.

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 agency has a good recruitment strategy, which is regularly evaluated to ensure sufficient adopters are recruited to meet the needs of children with an adoption plan. The service is working hard to recruit a diverse pool of adopters and is currently actively recruiting single and same sex adopters. At the time of the inspection, the service had been successful in recruiting adopters for older children, sibling groups and children with complex and additional needs. The service takes its responsibility

seriously in relation to siblings. Psychological assessments of sibling attachments are undertaken and careful consideration is given to the needs of each individual child and whether they should be placed separately or together.

Since the City of Salford is a small local authority geographically, some children are placed outside the area. However, effective and positive working relationships exist between the adoption service, its neighbouring authorities and the local consortium of adoption agencies. The manager is actively involved in the consortium and the team has access to the Adoption 22 database, which provides information about children and families. In situations 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.

There are clear processes and procedures to handle adoption enquiries and to follow up any expressions of interest. Adopters receive written information regarding the adoption process, promptly and the information provided is useful and easy to read. Information meetings are held regularly and the majority of adopters are complimentary about the presentation and the quality of information provided.

Salford has a thorough preparation, assessment and approval process of adopters. However applications are taken after preparation training. The service ensures preparation training is held regularly. The materials used are appropriate, effective and fit within a framework of equal opportunities and address anti-discriminatory practice. Preparation training is held on a regular basis and is tailored to meet the varying needs of adopters, for example, second time around 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 in collaboration with another adoption agency.

Adopters' assessments are well documented and are of a good standard. They are thorough, analytical and cover issues of parenting capacity well. The service carries out written references in relation to the adopters, employer references, checks with applicants' former partners, as well as sons and daughters from the relationship. It also ensures the views of their children and extended family members are obtained in relation to prospective adopters' applications. 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 ensures adopters are able to look after children in a safe manner through the use of comprehensive pet and health and safety assessments. Salford has a system to monitor the timescales of adopters' assessments. All adopters' assessments seen were carried out in legislative prescribed timescales.

Adopters were positive about their experience of the assessment process, stating that the assessments had been carried out by extremely professional, skilled and sensitive staff. All adopters commented on the accuracy and realism of the report, which 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 and the Independent Review Mechanism. This information is reinforced to adopters through out the adoption process.

The adoption service is extremely child focused and every effort is made to ensure a child is matched with adopters, who best meet their assessed needs. There is good involvement from other services, for example, Salford Adoptive Families Support Service (SAFSS) who consider the appropriateness of placing a child with adopters. Considerable thought is given to the strengths and vulnerabilities of the adopters and the needs of the child. Every effort is made to ensure children are matched with adopters, who best meet their assessed needs.

The pre-matching meeting and the formal matching meeting which encapsulates this information is well documented also ensures there is good and effective matching with a child and their adopters. Adopters are fully involved in matching meetings, their views are included in adoption placement reports which are comprehensive and provide a good foundation for the stability of the adoption placement. Salford's matching process is also enhanced through the robust activities of the adoption staff and the adoption panel. The service's holistic matching process ensures adopters are well able to consider the implications of such issues for themselves and their family. The matching process as stated earlier is well documented and is extremely informative to any adoptee who subsequently seeks to access their records.

Introductions and placements are well managed and mid point reviews take place. The medical adviser and other professionals involved with children talk with adopters or attend meetings to provide full information.

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 clear written set of policies and procedures which govern its function and operation. There is a well-established practice of adopters being invited to attend the panel. 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, and reasons for the panel's conclusions and recommendations are clearly recorded.

Adopters are invited to attend the adoption panel, with good preparatory work undertaken with them prior to their attendance. Adopters stated that both the chairperson and panel members welcomed them and made real efforts to put them at ease. This friendliness though, does not detract from the panel's thoroughness in considering matters before them. Adopters stated that the questions asked were relevant and appropriate.

The agency's decision maker ensures all information relating to a case, including panel minutes, are thoroughly scrutinised before making a decision. Notifications of the decision are personally signed by the decision maker which demonstrates the value and respect held for all people involved in the process. They are also always sent out within the necessary timescales.

The manager and all staff working within the adoption service are appropriately qualified, skilled and extremely experienced in their work. Staff selection and recruitment procedures are robust and the council has sound employment practices.

There is a safeguarding policy and procedure, which fully 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 outstanding.

The arrangements for adoption support are outstanding. The service has an excellent understanding of adoption as a holistic process. At the centre of this is a clear focus on children's needs and recognition of the life-long implications for all those affected by adoption. Support is therefore recognised as being of vital importance and is clearly focused on the needs of people, regardless of the particular stage that they may be at in the adoption process.

The service's strong commitment to support has resulted in proactive, multi-agency, integrated adoption support services being developed. The range of support services provided is extensive and available to adopters both before and after the adoption order. These support services include support from staff during the matching, introduction and placement of a child with their adoptive family. Financial support packages, a regular newsletter and an annual picnic. There is also a peer support scheme, support groups for adopters, as well as young and older adopted children. In addition, internal and external training is also available. Excellent working relationships between the adoption service and other council services has resulted in adopters accessing a variety of specialist services to meet specific needs, for example, the care and education support team can provide additional educational support to a child.

The service, in partnership with child and adolescent mental health services CAMHS, has also developed the Salford Adoptive Families Support Service (SAFSS). This is an excellent specialist post adoption psychological and therapeutic social work service, which offers consultation and input to the preparation of children and adopters prior to placement. It is also able to provide early intervention and post adoption support for children identified as having, or likely to have significant emotional or behavioural difficulties. In addition, the adoption service is able to access the Cornerstone Project, which is run by a national voluntary agency and provides a therapeutic

service to children who have experienced sexual abuse. Consultation and support can also be offered to adoptive parents, who are caring for sexually abused children. This extremely wide range of very accessible, qualitative support services, together with extremely good, qualitative matching of children with adopters contributes greatly to the promotion of stable and successful adoption placements.

Salford has commissioned a voluntary agency, to provide a service to inter country adopters, which also includes the provision of support services.

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, 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. Staff indicated that the specialist advisers provided an extremely good service and were an asset to the adoption service. A similar view was held by adopters who had used their services.

People affected by adoption receive a service from the adoption agency that is appropriate and tailored to their particular need. They are treated fairly, openly and with respect and sensitivity. Written policies are carried out in practice by experienced workers who respond promptly to requests.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

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. However, child permanence reports are not always written in an appropriate style and sometimes contain limited information regarding the physical description and personality of the birth parents. The service though does invite birth parents to contribute later life letters, so they can record their views for the child. In situations where it is not possible to obtain their views the reasons for this are generally recorded.

Once a match has been agreed, there is an opportunity for the birth and adoptive

parents to meet. This enables adopters to receive information from the birth parents, first hand and can provide them with a firm basis for future contact arrangements. These meetings are prepared for carefully, sensitively handled and generally well managed.

Salford 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 to birth parents and families at various stages of the adoption process, for example, when an adoption plan is being considered for their child, as well as at the matching and placement process. However, birth parents and their families are able to access this service at any time.

The service is committed to gathering information about children's backgrounds and encouraging birth families to contribute to their child's heritage. They recognise the importance of ensuring life story work and books are completed both to prepare the child and to provide information in later life. However, life story work is not always carried out to a consistent standard and completed a timely way.

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. In addition to this, the agency provides a birth records counselling service. The experiences and learning derived from this work is used to inform the agency's adoption practice.

The agency has commissioned a voluntary adoption service to provide intermediary services. All commissioned services are supported by written agreements, which are carefully monitored so that they provide a qualitative service and value for money.

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's two children's guides 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 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 management of the adoption service is undertaken by people who are appropriately qualified and have considerable knowledge, experience and skills in adoption. Staff are extremely positive about their managers and complimentary about their leadership and management style. Lines of accountability, responsibilities and levels of delegation are in place and are known to the staff. Managers have a strong commitment to adoption and there are links at all levels to other social work teams and services within the authority.

There are a number of quality assurance systems in place to monitor the agency's performance. There are regular reports and meetings with elected members, which reflect their active corporate parenting role. The managerial team also discuss and carefully monitor the progress of children, where permanency decisions have been made. The adoption panel's role in quality assurance is clear. However, while quality assurance at the strategic levels of the adoption service are robust, this is not always the case at the operational level, for example, the omissions in relation to the signing and dating of agency records.

Staff are suitably qualified and have considerable knowledge, experience and skills in working with children and in particular, children being placed for adoption. They are experienced and enthusiastic about their work and open to new ideas. Allocation of work is managed equitably. All staff receive regular qualitative, informal, and formal supervision and achieve good standards of work. The adoption service has sufficient staff resources to undertake the range of work required. The service places an importance on staff training and they are actively encouraged and enabled to take up the training and development opportunities available. Staff are very positive about this, state the training 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. However, some records were not signed and dated by the author.

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. Similarly, personnel and panel members files are well ordered, securely stored and contain all the required information.

The service's premises are well located, resourced and provide comfortable accommodation for the workforce. All necessary security and back-up safeguards are in place.

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 application for the assessment of adopters is completed prior to the preparation training (NMS 4)
- improve the quality of child permanence reports and ensure life story books are of a consistent standard (NMS 8)
- ensure robust quality assurance systems are implemented and maintained for all aspects of the adoption service. (NMS 27.3)