

Trafford 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

Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council's (TMBC) 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 local voluntary adoption agency.

The service also carries out the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters. Support of adoption placements and post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption is provided, including birth records counselling and intermediary work. In addition, TMBC commissions some post adoption support services and intermediary work from a voluntary adoption agency. The service operates and maintains a letter box system to support 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 was an announced inspection of the adoption service. The purpose of the inspection was to assess its compliance with the national minimum standards (NMS) for adoption agencies and services. In the main, the adoption service was meeting the adoption national minimum standards 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 service has a recruitment strategy, which promotes equality and diversity and is clearly based on an awareness of the children requiring adoption. It is good at recruiting adopters and carries out a thorough assessment process to ensure people are suitable and competent to adopt children.

Good matching processes are in place and a great deal of thought and care is given to the matching and placement of children with adopters. Matching documentation is of a good standard and can assist adult adoptees accessing their file to understand the reasons for being matched with their family.

The adoption panel is efficiently organised, conducted and effective in its quality assurance role. The agency decision is made in a timely manner, although it is not always communicated in the timescales prescribed in the adoption guidance.

The adoption service provides a good range of in-house, multi-agency and external support services to adopters, both pre and post order. This support is generally well thought out and provides families with the necessary support to maximise the chances of successful adoption placements. Contractual arrangements are in place for the assessment and support of inter-country adopters.

Trafford fully recognises the lifelong implications of adoption. Considerable efforts are therefore made to engage birth parents in the care planning process, so that they are able to participate and contribute to their child's future. Life story work is carried out in a timely manner and the life story book produced to a high standard. This greatly assists in ensuring children have a well recorded background. It also supports the maintenance of their heritage and promotes respect and equality for all those involved in the adoption triangle. Contractual arrangements are in place for independent support to birth families.

The service is managed effectively and efficiently. 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 and child focused service. There are two children guides in place for younger and older children, however, the details of the children's rights director are inaccurate. Case records are generally of a good standard, however a small percentage are not accurate, nor are they signed or dated by the author.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last full inspection of the TMBC was carried out in June 2008, which resulted in three actions and four recommendations being made. The service had made efforts to address these matters and ensured that all the required regulatory information was in their Statement of Purpose, personnel and panel members' files. Quality assurance systems had been developed and improved.

With regard to the four recommendations, three of these have been addressed. Prospective adopters now complete an application prior to commencing preparation training. The health and safety checklist has been improved and is now comprehensive. Life story work and the production of a life story book is completed in a timely way. However the recommendation relating to the quality of agency records has only been partly addressed, for although supervisors' decisions are now recorded, some records contained inaccuracies and were not always signed and dated. A recommendation has been made regarding this.

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.

Trafford's adoption service has a written plan for recruiting adopters which has recently been revised. The service is currently targeting specific groups of people, such as single adopters, those from different ethnic groups and same sex couples. Its successful recruitment campaigns have resulted in a diverse range of adopters being recruited. This has resulted in more placement choice for those children waiting to be adopted, who live locally and regionally.

The service works well with other adoption agencies through the national and regional arrangements in place. This has ensured the service effectively matches children to adopters, who can meet their assessed needs, for example, children with diverse cultural, ethnic, language and religious needs. They have also successfully recruited adopters to meet the needs of children with complex additional needs. The service takes its responsibility seriously in relation to siblings. Careful consideration is given to the needs of each individual child and whether they should be placed separately or together. The service has been successful in placing a number of large sibling groups with adoptive families.

Children's views and feelings are taken into account in accordance with their age. These are recorded in the child's written assessment and every effort is made to meet them. Non-verbal cues are considered in relation to young children and those with communication difficulties. The service also listens to foster carers' views, taking into account the fact that these are the people who may know the children best.

Prospective adopters are fully informed of the histories and circumstances of children they consider and have access to all necessary details. The service's robust approach to adopters' assessments and effective matching ensures positive outcomes for children are achieved. During the past six years, there have been no adoption disruptions, with all placements moving on to successful adoptions.

The service has a formal, thorough and comprehensive preparation, assessment and approval process. Preparation training is held at various times and in an appropriate venue. Materials used fit well within a framework of equal opportunity and anti-discriminatory practice. Preparation training is regularly evaluated and the programme is reviewed on an annual basis. Foster carers who wish to be considered as adoptive parents receive the same information and preparation as other adopters. To reflect this practice, the service has developed adoption procedures specifically for foster carers.

Adopters express a high degree of satisfaction with the preparation they receive. They particularly appreciate the first hand information provided by adopters and birth parents. For example, some said: 'It's an excellent, informative process that equipped us for the journey. It helped us to understand adoption from everyone's perspective'.

Adopters' assessments are generally comprehensive, analytical and cover all the necessary areas. Issues of potential bullying are addressed; however, these are not always fully explored and do not always demonstrate that adopters have the competence to deal with matters of bullying effectively. 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.

Adopters indicate that their assessments were robust and the process handled in an extremely skilled manner by highly competent workers. For example, it was: 'thorough, unobtrusive and enjoyable'. They confirm that they were kept informed of progress throughout the assessment and it was undertaken at an appropriate pace. Adopters also confirmed that they received full and accurate written information about the child they were considering being placed with them. In most cases, this involved attendance at a life appreciation day, where they heard first hand information about the child from a variety of professionals. Adopters prepare information about themselves in a variety of ways, for example, albums, talking books, photographs and digital video discs (DVD) which are used to prepare children for adoption.

Panel policies and procedures are comprehensive and carried out in practice. Adopters are invited to attend panel and are largely positive in their comments about being prepared and put at ease. The adoption panel is properly constituted and has appropriate membership. Panel members have a breadth of experience and knowledge of adoption and childcare including specialist knowledge of children's health, education and special needs. New panel members have an opportunity to observe panel before commencing as a panel member. No panel member is allowed to begin work until a Criminal Bureau Check clearance has been obtained and a confidentiality agreement has been signed. Panel chaired members receive regular training including an annual joint training session with the agency's adoption staff. The training provided ensures panel members are kept abreast of legislative changes and government guidance.

The adoption panel is efficiently organised and is convened to avoid delays in the consideration of prospective adopters and matching of children to adopters. They now have a dedicated panel administrator which is highly beneficial to the service.

Panel papers are sent out well in advance of the panel, enabling panel members to fully consider all issues regarding a case prior to panel. Panel minutes are of good quality, comprehensive, well structured and clearly detail the reasons for recommendations made.

The agency decision is made without delay. The decision maker takes the

responsibility seriously and gives full consideration to all panel papers before making a decision. There are arrangements in place to communicate the decision to all those concerned. However, in at least one instance, there was delay in notifying the people of the decision.

The manager is suitable to manage the adoption service and appropriate checks are in place to confirm this. Robust recruitment and selection procedures ensure that children and young people are safeguarded by the provision of suitable staff. The stable staff team is well qualified and experienced. Staffs' breadth of experience and knowledge in adoption and child care matters enables them to give good support and guidance to adopters. This is recognised and appreciated by adopters and was commented on by a number of adopters, who saw this as a valuable asset to the service. Specialist advisers working with the service have a good understanding of adoption and are able to deliver an effective service to adopters and their children.

Appropriate safeguarding policies are in place which promote the welfare of service users. Child protection procedures include clear guidance for staff where children are placed for adoption or have been adopted. There are also clear procedures in place for dealing with allegations of historical abuse. There have been no safeguarding issues in the service since the last inspection. All staff have renewed safeguarding training within the last 12 months.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Trafford fully recognises the importance of providing good quality support to adopters in order to maintain stable and permanent homes for children. It has therefore been proactive within the locality in raising awareness of adoption in schools. The manager of the service has attended several meetings with designated teachers to discuss adoption. Literature has also been produced, such as, 'Adopted Children in school and early years settings' which has been circulated to schools and early years services.

The service has developed a full range of support services which are available for adopters, both before, and after, the adoption order. These support services are provided in a variety of ways, for example, some services are provided directly by Trafford, whilst other are provided in partnership with local voluntary organisations or other services, such as the children and adolescent mental health services.

These support services include financial support packages, a regular news letter, support groups, coffee mornings and the Parents Link Scheme, which is an informal buddy scheme. In addition, internal and external training is provided to adopters. Good working relationships between the adoption service and other council services have resulted in adopters accessing a variety of specialist services to meet specific needs, for example, speech therapy and additional educational support to a child. The service will also, if necessary, commission individual therapy for an adoptive family.

Adoptive parents have a good understanding of the importance and in keeping safe any information provided by birth families. They well understand the need to address discrimination such as racism and how to promote children's self esteem and identity. This ensures positive outcomes are achieved for children.

Inter-country adopters are also able to access Trafford's support services, as well as those provided by the commissioned voluntary adoption agency.

The agency has recently introduced a children's guide to post adoption which outlines the services available. Adopters are also made aware of the support services available, at an early stage, in their contact with the service. Adoption support plans are generally of a good standard. Any requests for support are responded to promptly, support packages are well thought out and good support is provided. There is also a real confidence shown by adopters that, should they require support from Trafford in the future, it will be provided. The adoption service provides adoptive families and children with good support and this has undoubtedly contributed to the promotion of stable and successful adoption placements.

The adoption service has access to a variety of specialist advisers, with written protocols in place regarding their roles. The range of specialist services available increases the likelihood of adopters receiving appropriate support at all stages of the adoption process. Both staff and adopters indicated that the specialist advisers provided a good service.

The agency's practice is service user focused. Those using the service are carefully listened to and their wishes and feelings considered. The service fully consults and encourages service users to be involved in any decisions made which affects their life. The agency also ensures that the welfare and safety of the service user, and others affected by the adoption, are carefully considered before deciding any service should be provided. Any adoption service commissioned by the agency is supported by a written agreement, which is regularly reviewed. This ensures the service provided is of the required qualitative standard and able to meet the needs of the agency and its service users.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The holistic nature of the service ensures that the life long implications of adoption are recognised. The service makes every effort to involve birth parents and their families in planning for children and the placement. They are encouraged to participate in statutory reviews and the formulation of the child's care plans. Their views are clearly recorded in the child permanence reports wherever possible. They are also encouraged to comment on the information provided in the child permanence reports, and this is recorded in the document. However, not all avail themselves of this opportunity.

There is an independent counselling service for birth parents which is provided by another voluntary adoption agency. Staff work hard to ensure birth parents are aware of this service and encourage them to use it. However, take up is limited. In addition to this service, birth parents have access to support provided by staff within the agency.

Staff recognise the vital importance of life story work and this is a strength of the service. Considerable efforts are made to produce life story books in a timely way. They are produced in a child friendly format and provide a clear understanding of the life history, addressing any issues relating to identity.

Contact arrangements are well recorded. Direct contact is usually managed by the adopters; however, Trafford will provide adopters with support, where the arrangements are difficult or complex. Arrangements for indirect contact are managed through the letter box system. This is a robust, well established and managed system.

Later life letters are routinely provided which are sensitively and appropriately written and provide good quality information. Some parents have been assisted to provide children with a DVD in which the birth parent gives permission to the child to move on and says 'good bye' to the children. Adopters and birth parents are encouraged and supported to meet each other. The meetings are well prepared for, effectively managed. Adopters, as well as birth parents, have commented favourably about them. 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 underpinned by written agreements, which are carefully monitored to ensure the services are effective and provide value for money.

There is a clear strategy in place to work with had support birth families both before and after adoption. Information is made available about local and national support gaps and services to help birth parents, for example, with regard to contact arrangements.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

he promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. 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 very hard to find appropriately matched placements for children, taking into account their background or specific needs and provides very effective adoption support for children with complex needs. The service greatly respects birth parents. This is demonstrated in their work and every effort is made to involve them in planning for their children's future.

The adoption service carries out its various tasks and responsibilities effectively and efficiently. Its Statement of Purpose is up to date and clearly details its aims, objectives and the services provided. The Statement of Purpose is supported by a range of policies and procedures, which inform and underpin the operations and strategic 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 nearly all the required information. However, the information regarding the address and telephone number of the Children's Rights Director are inaccurate.

Adopters are provided with well written and comprehensive information about the adoption process, which is sent out in a timely way. This literature is welcoming, does not discriminate, is attractively presented and is clearly seen in the service's practice. A system is in place to prioritise the assessment of those 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 the necessary background, knowledge and skills in adoption. They demonstrate a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities and are committed to the service. Staff speak highly of them and indicate that the adoption service is effectively led and managed.

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 and permanency panel's role in quality assurance is clear. However, whilst 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 inaccuracy and omissions in relation to the signing and dating of agency records.

The agency's staff are clear about their roles and lines of accountability. Communication is good. Staff have considerable knowledge, experience and skills in working with children and in particular, children being placed for adoption. The allocation of work is managed equitably. All staff receive regular qualitative, informal, and formal supervision and achieve good standards of work. The administrative support provided is of a good standard and staff are able to carry out their work in

an effective and efficient manner. The adoption service has sufficient staff and resources to undertake the range of work required. Staff speak positively of the range of training and professional development opportunities provided for them which they state are of a good standard.

The overall administration is efficient, well managed and appropriately structured to provide support to a busy agency. Administrative records are well maintained and stored in a confidential, secure manner. There are appropriate policies and procedures in place for case recording, and case records are well organised and maintained. The majority contain full and up-to-date information, although in a small percentage, the records are not accurate, dated or signed. Personnel and panel members' files are well ordered, securely stored and contain all the required information. Staff recruitment practices are robust and safeguard children.

The premises are spacious with good storage facilities and are extremely well resourced, with excellent information technology and communication systems. The premises are accessible, have sufficient parking 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):

- improve arrangements for conveying the decision to prospective adopters so that the decision is communicated within the timescales prescribed in the adoption guidance (NMS 13; and the Adoption and Children Act 2002 guidance)
- ensure the children's guide contains all the required regulatory information (Regulation 3(1), Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003)
- ensure all agency records are accurate, signed and dated (NMS 25.1 and NMS 27.1).