

Torbay Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Sean White
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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 Torbay adoption service operates from offices close to the town centre of Torquay. They are accessible to people with a legitimate interest.

The agency undertakes all statutory responsibilities in respect of adoption including:
The recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adoptive families, both domestic and overseas.

The matching of children with suitable adopters.

Placement support.

Post adoption support.

Birth family support.

Support services to adults who have been adopted, including birth records counselling and intermediary work.

Summary

The overall quality rating is inadequate - notice of action to improve.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

The service is struggling to perform to its best potential because of resource shortfalls, particularly in respect of social work staff and management support. Although this is being addressed by the agency, the difficulties are quite marked and will continue to be so until the agency infrastructure is improved.

The poorly resourced management, at the lower levels, has meant that strategic and policy development has been sidelined to enable the day to day operations to be given priority. Whilst this is appropriate under the circumstances it has left the agency struggling to move forward and develop its services in line with new legislation and increasing workload.

Improvements since the last inspection

Although the agency addressed the matters raised at the last full inspection, and a follow up visit acknowledged that progress had been made, the service has fallen back somewhat in recent times. Nevertheless, the agency is performing better than it was three years ago and has the potential to improve further if crucial issues such as policy development and management delegation are addressed without delay.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is inadequate.

This agency has a solid, underlying commitment to children and their need to be cared for in a permanent, loving home, that will provide a safe and secure environment within which they can grow and flourish. This is very evident in the commitment and approach of the agency's workers, who demonstrated considerable energy and dedication to their tasks and responsibilities.

Although the agency makes efforts to recruit sufficient adopters to meet the needs of local children requiring placements, its approach to recruitment is more providential than strategic and there is no formal, written plan, to implement or evaluate this approach.

Nevertheless, the core business of the agency the preparation, assessment and approval of adopters is undertaken with attention to detail and with clear evidence in assessment reports (Forms F) of applicants undergoing rigorous analysis of their capacity to be parents. The reports are well written, thorough and provide the adoption panel with all relevant information for it to consider and to make their recommendations.

All required checks are carried out and the health and safety checklist was of an excellent standard. It approaches the matching of children with adopters with the same thoroughness through working closely with colleagues in other sectors to achieve appropriate placements.

The agency has a very low disruption rate, which demonstrates the success of its endeavours when matching.

The quality of Children's Permanence Reports (CPRs), were of a less consistently satisfactory standard. Quality control of CPRs is not managed as well as it should be a role that appears to rest with the adoption team manager, which has led to professional relationships being strained when reports have been passed back for improvements to be made. This is a training issue for the department.

The arrangements for managing the administration of the application and assessment process were not as sound as they should be. Key information was not sought, for example, an employers reference on one occasion, and another, what should be routine processes, had sometimes failed. This appears to be because of a lack of consistency in the management and deployment of administrators and more importantly, the limited resources. Although it is acknowledged that this matter has

already been addressed, with an increase in staffing anticipated.

The adoption panel is suitably constituted with a membership that has a broad experience of adoption matters including adopters and birth parents and is chaired by an experienced, independent social worker. It undertakes its duties and responsibilities seriously and conscientiously and has a good track record of successful outcomes. The agency's approach to recruiting panel members is of a high standard. This is achieved through a thorough recruitment and selection process, the positions having been advertised and applications invited from all members of the community. It meets sufficiently frequently to deal with the amount of business placed before it.

The management of the panel although duly thorough, is somewhat inconsistent. The agenda frequently over runs, often by more than an hour, leaving presenting social workers and attending applicants waiting for considerable periods of time. The agency should examine how it constructs the agenda and the time management of items being discussed. Nevertheless, panel members are enabled and encouraged to participate fully in the proceedings and given every opportunity to express their points of view.

The panel is more confident in dealing with domestic adoption matters than with inter country issues. Although some training had been provided in this area there were clear issues of ignorance and naiveté in respect of adopting children from overseas, trans racial placements and ethnicity. This is an area where further training is required.

The administration of the panel is well organised, papers are circulated in sufficient time, minutes produced in an efficient manner and decision making letters dispatched very quickly. The minutes, however, do not fully reflect the matters raised by members, they only show the answers to issues raised, not the questions or issues themselves. This created some confusion and distress in at least one instance, when the panel had seemed to request further information, but it was very unclear why.

The most important matter that the agency has to address in respect of the panel is the lack of up to date policies and procedures to govern its responsibilities, duties and operational activities. It is not safe for this immensely important function in the adoption process not to be underpinned by sound policies and procedures that reflect current legislative and regulatory requirements.

The agency has a comprehensive child protection policy, corporate with other neighbouring authorities and can be accessed quickly and easily on the agency's intranet. However, it does not address safeguarding children in adoptive placements, either locally or those placed in a different authority, nor does it address protecting children receiving adoption support services.

The staff of the adoption service, which includes adoption support, are suitably qualified and experienced. They demonstrated high levels of skill and competence

and they were also clearly very knowledgeable in adoption matters. No one has achieved the Post Qualifying childcare award (PQ), although one worker has attained PQ Level 1 and hopes to complete later this year.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency provides adoptive families with a high level of support throughout the process of waiting, matching, introductions and placement. They work closely with children's social workers to establish sound, optimistic placements and liaise with other relevant bodies and organisations to access any specialist services that may be required. There was clear evidence that sophisticated support packages had been provided, which enabled complex and difficult situations to be realistically managed.

The assessing social worker maintains the support role for adoptive families until the adoption order is made, although this can be extended if appropriate or necessary and thereafter the adoption support team takes on the support responsibilities. However, there is no formal system in place to formally hand over the support functions, one family felt that they were on their own once the order had been made. A system that formally introduces the adoption support service near to, or at the point when the adoption order is made would provide for a smooth transition at this crucial part of the process.

Medical advice is readily available and the advisor, who is a member of the panel, is available for consultation and assistance to help on issues where her advice is crucial or necessary. The agency also has ready access to sound legal advice.

There are only limited and patchy support facilities available from the local Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) this is an area that senior managers are well aware of and are actively pursuing solutions.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency demonstrated that it has a strong commitment to working with birth parents in planning for their children's adoption, in contributing to the collection of information about their background and family and in providing support once their children have been placed or adopted. The workers in the adoption support team work to a high standard, and are clearly dedicated and conscientious about their duties and responsibilities, they also work incredibly hard and manage a large workload as best they can. However, the range of work requiring their input is growing and it is clear that there are insufficient resources to meet the demands that the service is facing.

Children's social workers are responsible for the development of life story work although there is a lack of cohesion and protocol as to how this is managed and

achieved. It is clear that the competing priorities of their responsibilities places a strain on their ability to manage this aspect of their work in a timely way. There were some instances, however, of partnership working with family centre workers and some input from the adoption support workers to achieve realistic life story work, but this was patchy, uncoordinated and not governed by any coherent procedure or practice guidance.

Nevertheless, there were some good examples of life story work having been satisfactorily undertaken and some adopters reported that they had received it in good time. However, there is room for improvement in this area.

Support for birth parents is somewhat lacking, particularly in its availability at crucial times. Whilst there were some examples seen of high quality work being undertaken, overall there was a resource shortfall in the adoption support team that results in unacceptably long waiting periods. The agency has recently cancelled an arrangement with an Adoption Support Agency (ASA), which had until now provided support to birth parents. This has left the service with a significant increase in workload that it is struggling to maintain.

Overall, the agency is undertaking some valuable work to a high standard but this is hampered significantly by the weak staffing resources, which is resulting in work not being achieved in a timely way in many instances.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is inadequate.

The agency is experiencing management difficulties at present which is impeding its ability to provide a top quality service that is able to meet its statutory responsibilities. Organisationally the management structure is very flat, which provides a coherent framework for the department as a whole, but which does not allow for strategic initiatives and operational efficiency of the service particularly at the lower reaches. However, this is being addressed, and it was outlined that staffing increases and the creation of a senior practitioner role have been agreed and are imminent. This, it is hoped by senior managers will alleviate the managerial burden and allow for more efficient delegation of operational matters to free the team manager to concentrate on strategic issues and policy development.

The manager who was not available during the inspection demonstrated a high level of skill and understanding of adoption matters. This was made clear in interviews with key personnel, the standard of quality control and the positive outcomes achieved by the service. The overall management of the agency suffers from

overload and therefore all that should be done or achieved to underpin its effectiveness is not achieved.

Policy and procedural development is poor. Most of the required policy framework is either non-existent or very out of date. The statement of purpose (SOP) refers to 2005 as the future, demonstrating that it has not been reviewed or amended for some considerable time. Although the document is appropriately written and presented, it does not reflect the service as it is. Similarly, other procedural guidance is out of date and does not address the demands of current, new legislation. There is a children's guide to adoption in place.

The information provided to prospective applicants is contained in an A5 leaflet, accompanied by a covering letter. Whilst this addresses the main issues of adoption, what it means and how the agency functions, it is not as comprehensive as some and would benefit from expansion and greater detail.

The organisation and management of workloads, staff supervision and support is inconsistent. It was not possible to determine any coherent allocation or workload management system. Supervision is regular, but the recording of decisions on case files was inconsistent and lacked thoroughness and team meetings had fluctuating frequencies. Training opportunities are of a satisfactory standard with workers being able to gain access to a range of developmental courses.

Although there was evidence that the authority monitors the operation of the adoption service and had put in place strategic initiatives to improve matters it is still a service that requires managerial and organisational improvements. The executive of the council receives appropriate information about the performance of the service although a recent election has brought about significant changes to the elected membership, which means that at the time of the visit, new members were in the early stages of developing their briefs.

As already indicated throughout this report, the service is understaffed at all levels. There are insufficient social workers to undertake the range of responsibilities, there is insufficient administrative support, further hampered by secondments to and from other services and children's social workers have recently had a case load increase that may well impact on their facility for effective joint working and meeting adoption targets.

The workers, nevertheless, demonstrated particularly high levels of expertise, skill, knowledge and commitment, indeed it is difficult to gainsay their efforts, their dedication and conscientious approach to achieving best outcomes for children being a beacon of hope and optimism.

The administration of the agency, although being affected by staffing resources as outlined above, is reasonably well organised in the main. The difficulties presented by frequent changes to personnel and the lack of a coherent administrative policy and procedure has resulted in inefficient operations from time to time and oversights that have led to crucial information not being sourced.

Case file management and administration is generally good, with all required information in place. However there was no evidence of any auditing or quality assurance system. Some checklists are incomplete and the recording of casework supervision decisions is inconsistent and perfunctory.

The recruitment practices for staff are satisfactory and appropriately thorough and personnel records contained the required details; the records in respect of panel members, however, are incomplete and need maintaining to the required standard.

The premises are satisfactory and provide for a comfortable and secure working environment.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
2	produce a written plan for the implementation and evaluation of its adoption recruitment strategies. Reg. 7 AAR 2005.	31/08/2007
10	produce a written policy and procedure about the handling of the functions of the adoption panel. Reg. 7 AAR 2005.	31/08/2007
19	produce a child protection policy that reflects the safeguarding of children in adoption placements, including those placed in another area. Regulation 9 LAAS 2003	31/08/2007
19	make arrangements for 20% of staff to achieve the Post Qualifying Child Care Award.	31/08/2007
1	produce an up to date statement of purpose that reflects the current functions of the service. Reg. 2 LAAS 2003.	31/08/2007
16	make arrangements for the service to be managed effectively and efficiently. Reg. 7 LAAS 2003	31/08/2007
21	make arrangements to appoint sufficient staff to undertake the range of responsibilities of the agency. Reg.10 LAAS 2003.	31/08/2007
28	maintain records for all adoption panel members that include all required information. Reg. 15 LAAS 2003.	31/08/2007

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

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- implement more effective quality monitoring systems, and training in the writing of, Children's Permanence Reports.
 - seek an employers reference for all applicants, particularly when they have access to children in their employment.
 - manage the adoption panel more efficiently to avoid over-running.
 - arrange training for the panel on issues surrounding inter-country adoption to enhance members' understanding of this area and increase their knowledge about diversity issues in general.
 - construct panel minutes in a way that outlines the deliberations of the members and what areas of clarification are being sought.
 - arrange for a formal system for 'handing over' support functions from the assessing social worker to the adoption support team at the time the order is made; this would provide adopters with a point of contact and access should they need it.
 - make arrangements for easier, more effective access to CASMHS services.
 - place more emphasis on the formulation and production of life-story work.
 - make arrangements for more efficient delegation of management responsibilities.
 - make arrangements for a more coherent administrative structure to enhance the operational framework of the agency.
 - introduce a system for auditing case files on a regular basis.