

Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Marian Denny / Rosemary Chapman
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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 Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead's (RBWM) adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters. A similar service is provided to inter-country adopters through its commissioning arrangements with a voluntary adoption agency. The adoption service also undertakes the matching, introduction and the placement of children with adopters.

The adoption service, in conjunction with the Berkshire Advisory Adoption Service (BAAS), a service which has been set up and funded by the local authorities in the Berkshire Consortium also provides support to adopters and adopted children. Post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, including birth records counselling and intermediary work is also provided. BAAS provides independent counselling and support of birth parents and families. In addition, the service manages and maintains the letter box system, which supports the exchange of information in adoption placements and where necessary, supports post adoption contact.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The inspection of RBWM was an announced inspection.

The main focus of the inspection was to determine whether the branch was providing a qualitative adoption service, with the children's welfare, safety and needs at the centre of the adoption process and permanent, stable adoptive homes provided.

All the Adoption National Minimum Standards (NMS) and the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003 were assessed under the outcome areas of Staying Safe, Enjoying and Achieving, Positive Contribution and Organisation. The adoption service was meeting the Adoption National Minimum Standards and the Adoption Agencies Regulations. Consequently, Staying Safe and Organisation were judged as good, with Making a Positive Contribution and Enjoying and Achieving judged as outstanding. One action was made in this inspection, which related to a regulatory function, relating to the adoption panel. Five recommendations were made, four of these related to case records and one to the health and safety checklist used to ensure adopters care for children safely.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last full inspection of the RBWM was carried out in July 2004, which resulted in one action and five recommendations being made. The action related to customising the children's guide and ensuring it contained all the information required by regulation. In September 2005, the action was followed up, which confirmed the action had been addressed. With regard to the five recommendations made, three related to case records, one to the policy and procedures in relation to specialist advisers and one to staff recruitment. At the time of this inspection all these recommendations had been 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 adoption service's recruitment strategy is based on an awareness of children requiring adoption. It is a good, effective strategy, which ensures there are sufficient adopters to meet the needs of children requiring adoptive placements. There are clear processes and procedures to handle adoption enquiries and to follow up any expressions of interest. Information meetings are held on a regular basis and adopters are complimentary about the presentation and quality of information provided. The service is very child focused with children 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.

Identification of children requiring adoption, the management of matching and placing children is well coordinated through effective operational systems that promote continuity and cooperation between the adoption service and children's services.

The agency has a thorough preparation, assessment and approval process of adopters. Preparation training is tailored to meet the varying needs of adopters, for example, those wishing to adopt a child from overseas attend inter-country preparation groups, which are provided in collaboration with another agency. Both domestic and inter-country adopters spoke highly of the preparation training, stating that groups were 'well organised', materials used 'informative' and 'challenged one's thoughts about adoption'. Whilst some adopters thought the materials were 'well presented', others said the trainer's presentation skills could be improved. The majority of adopters agreed that the preparation training had provided them with a sound foundation to explore all aspects of becoming an adoptive parent.

Adopters' assessments are generally of a very good quality. They are thorough,

analytical, clearly linked to competencies and cover issues of diversity, which are well documented. The service carries out written references in relation to the adopters, employer references and checks with applicants' former partners; even if there are no children from the relationship are obtained. 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. However, in one file there was some inaccurate information relating to a statutory check which had been completed. Further investigation revealed that in a previous application, accurate information regarding this matter had been brought to the notice of the service and had been dealt with in a robust and satisfactory manner. The agency also ensures adopters are able to look after children in a safe manner through the use of a health and safety checklist. This checklist is not comprehensive.

Adopters stated their assessments had been thorough and carried out by professional, knowledgeable, skilled and sensitive staff. Their report was accurate and given to adopters, in the required legislative timescale.

Adopters receive written information regarding the matching, introductory and placement processes and information is provided regarding the National Adoption Register. Before a match is agreed, the adoption service makes strenuous efforts to ensure adopters are given accurate, up-to-date and full written information regarding a child. Life appreciation days have also been introduced, which enables adopters to hear firsthand, qualitative information about the child's life. Adopters are also given the opportunity to discuss this information, enabling them to consider the implications of this information for themselves and their family. The adoption service has been proactive in improving the quality of information provided to adopters and have mentored and supported childcare workers in the completion of the child permanence report (CPR). However, despite this work, some of the CPR's in the children's files were of variable quality. The adoption service's practice though is extremely child focussed and considerable thought is given to matching, with the needs of the child the paramount consideration in any decision making. Consequently, the service's practice is of good quality and every effort is made to make sure that the best outcome is obtained for the child.

RBWM ensures children's wishes and feelings regarding adoption are taken into account and this is carefully recorded in their file. RBWM carries out work to prepare and support children to move to their adoptive family and a life story book produced. However, in one file, the life story book had not been produced to a qualitative standard.

The adoption panel, the East Berkshire Panel, is managed and administered BAAS. Clearly written adoption panel policies and procedures are in place, which fully meet the adoption NMS and Regulations.

Adopters are invited to attend the adoption panel. Good preparatory work is undertaken with them prior to their attendance. Adopters stated that the chairperson and panel members 'welcomed' them, did their best to put them 'at ease' and the questions asked were 'appropriate' and 'pertinent'. In one case though, adopters had

been invited to attend panel, however, on arrival at the venue learnt that the matter was to be deferred. This deferment caused the adopters distress and was avoidable.

The panel is appropriately constituted and arranged at a frequency that avoids any delay in considering the approval of prospective adopters. The panel was well organised and chaired. Panel members were well prepared, made appropriate observations and asked relevant questions. Panel minutes are informative and clearly state the panel's discussion, however, the reasons for conclusions reached are not always clearly recorded.

The agency's decision maker ensures all information relating to a case, as well as the panel minutes, are thoroughly scrutinised before making a decision. Notifications of the decision are sent out within the timescales.

Staff recruitment systems are thorough and demonstrate that workers and managers appointed are suitable to undertake their responsibilities; all checks are routinely undertaken. The manager and all staff working within the adoption service are appropriately qualified, knowledgeable, skilled and experienced in their work.

There is a safeguarding policy and procedure, which fully meets the adoption NMS and Regulations. A good recording system is in place to enable staff to record safeguarding issues effectively. All 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 RBWM fully recognises the importance of providing support to adopters in maintaining stable and permanent homes for children. Consequently, the adoption service, in conjunction with the local consortium have pooled their resources and developed a range of qualitative adoption support services, which are available to all adopters in Berkshire.

The services include financial support packages, a news letter, which is produced twice a year, support groups for adopters, young adopted children and teenagers, and there is also an out-of- bounds course for adopted children, which is run once a year. In addition, RBWM arranges for adoptive parents to become members of Adoption UK for three years. There is a good working relationship with the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), who provide training, consultation and direct work with families.

BAAS runs post approval training for adopters, for example, on 'contact', 'explaining adoption' and they also hold workshops for adopters' extended families, which explores the implications of adoption and what it might mean for them. They also operate a support group for adoptive fathers.

Inter-country adopters are able to access any of the above services, including the

Adopters' Conference. In addition, RBWM has commissioned a voluntary agency, Parents and Children Together (PACT) to provide specialist information, advice and support to inter country adopters and Pan-Berkshire is also available for support.

Adopters are made aware of the support services available at an early stage of their contact with the agency and are confident such support would be provided, if required. Requests for support are responded to 'promptly' and the support provided is described as 'appropriate' and 'helpful'. Written adoption support plans were of a good standard.

The agency has access to a variety of specialist advisers and there are written protocols in place regarding their roles. The service provided is of an extremely good standard and provides an invaluable asset to the overall processes of adoption and adoption support.

The agency's practice is service user focused. Those using the service are carefully listened to and their wishes and feelings considered. The agency considers the welfare and safety of the service user and others affected by the adoption when trying to determine whether a service should be provided.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

RBWM fully recognises the lifelong implications of adoption and has a thorough commitment to offering support to birth families, as illustrated in their arrangement with BAAS to provide independent support to birth parents. This service is available, as soon as adoption becomes the plan for a child. Birth parents are invited to contribute, so far as is possible, to the future plans being made for their child and the proposed contact arrangements. In every case their views are actively sought and these are fully recorded. Birth parents are encouraged and where necessary assisted to read the CPR, with their views and comments actively sought in relation to its content.

The arrangements with BAAS are well developed and managed and enables birth parents and relatives to have the opportunity to contribute to the maintenance of their children's background and heritage. Birth parents and their families are encouraged to be involved in constructing life-story books and offered the chance to meet their child's adopters.

BAAS also operates and manages the letterbox system on behalf of RBWM, which facilitates the exchange of information between the child and their birth parents and family. This system is managed in a robust and effective manner. Considerable support is provided to birth parents and their families to maintain contact through the letterbox system and at times this includes visits by the letterbox coordinator to assist with letter writing and taking photographs. In some instances, BAAS also facilitates and manages direct contact between the child and their birth parents, siblings and family.

In addition to this service, BAAS provides a range of support services for birth parents, including a birth mothers' support group, run on its behalf by Slough Borough Council, and a birth fathers group. The service also produces a range of leaflets, which provides information on local and national support networks and groups.

BAAS provides an extremely high quality of service to birth parents and their families, as illustrated by one service user's comments, who described staff as 'highly professional' and the service received was 'exceptional'.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

RBWM's adoption service is well managed.

The Statement of Purpose is comprehensive and contains all the information required under the Adoption Agencies NMS and Regulations. The document is circulated to staff and is readily available to service users. Written policies and procedures have been revised in accordance with the Adoption and Children Act 2002. These documents are of a good standard, accurately reflect the Statement of Purpose and provide a clear framework for the service's operation.

The service has a user friendly, children's guide to adoption, which is available in different formats to meet the differing needs of children and contain all the necessary information prescribed in the Adoption NMS and Regulations.

Adopters are provided with well written and comprehensive information regarding the adoption process. This literature clearly indicates that people who are interested in becoming adoptive parents will be welcomed without prejudice and this is reflected in the service's practice.

The service has a system in place to prioritise the assessment of those prospective adopters, who are most likely to meet the needs of children waiting to be adopted. They also provide written information about the preparation and support services available to prospective adopters.

The adoption service's management team are extremely knowledgeable, experienced and skilled in childcare and adoption. They are very committed to the service and provide strong, effective leadership to the adoption service. Staff speak highly of the service's management team and they provide a good role model to their staff.

There are clear written procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the adoption service. A supervisory and appraisal system is in place, which is used to monitor staff's performance and ensure a quality service. Staff are supervised and appraised in accordance with the agency's policies. The agency's administrative support is of a good standard and enables staff to carry out their work in an effective and efficient manner. There are good quality assurance systems in place, which effectively monitor the agency's performance. The Council's scrutiny committee is committed to the adoption of children as a positive choice for permanence and is kept fully informed of the agency's activities.

The adoption service's staff are clear about their roles, and lines of accountability and communication are good. Staff are able to demonstrate knowledge, experience and skills in working with children in general and adoption in particular. They are encouraged and well supported in their work. Staff acknowledged they receive regular supervision, both on an informal and formal basis. The adoption service has sufficient staff resources to undertake the range of work required. Staff spoke positively of the wide range of training and professional development opportunities provided them, which they stated were of a good standard.

There are appropriate policies and procedures in place for case recording and access to records. Case records are well organised, in good order and contained all the required information. Decisions by supervisors are recorded on case files and they are audited on a frequent basis. However, in one file there was a breach of confidentiality, as the file contained a panel agenda, which contained names of other adopters.

There is a clearly written policy and procedure in place for accessing records, which meet the legislative requirements. The adoption service's management team ensures that these arrangements are followed.

The overall administration is efficient, well managed and appropriately structured to provide support to a busy agency. Administrative records are well maintained, stored confidentially and securely kept. Personnel files demonstrated a rigorous approach to recruitment and selection, all files included required information, were well ordered and securely stored. Panel members' files are similarly well ordered and kept.

The premises are very well resourced. There is space, storage, good information technology equipment and communication systems. The premises are accessible, have sufficient parking and are fit for purpose.

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
10	ensure the adoption panel only defers matters in accordance with the Adoption Regulations (The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 Schedule 3 Part 4 regulation 26 (2)(b)).	01/04/2008

Recommendations

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

- ensure an accurate record is kept of all prospective adopters' statutory checks (NMS 4)
- improve the health and safety checklist for prospective adopters (NMS 4)
- improve the quality of CPRS (NMS 5)
- ensure life story books are produced to a consistent qualitative standard (NMS 8)
- ensure that there are no breaches of confidentiality in case records (NMW 26).