

Bracknell forest Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Rossella Volpi / Mike Stapley
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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

Bracknell Forest Council's Adoption Service comprises the statutory responsibilities associated with current adoption legislation and regulations. These include the recruitment, preparation and assessment of domestic adopters; the family finding, matching and placement of children; support to placements both pre and post adoption order; post adoption support to adult adoptees, including intermediary work; post adoption support to relatives of adoptees; support to birth parents whose children will be or have been placed for adoption. The service is delivered through the family placement team, whose remit includes both fostering and adoption.

Bracknell Forest is part of a local consortium, set, in relation to adoption work, with the other five Berkshire unitary authorities. Each authority jointly funds the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service (BAAS). Through this arrangement a range of resources is available to the six members. Resources include the operation and administration of the adoption panel; the letterbox system; the management of closed records; specialist advice and training; independent support to birth families.

The authority is committed to fulfilling its obligations under the Adoption (Inter-country Aspects) Act 1999, to provide, or arrange to provide, an inter-country adoption service. Currently the authority delegates this area of work to a voluntary adoption agency based in Reading.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This was a key, announced inspection, conducted over the course of one week by two inspectors.

The agency demonstrates excellent commitment to supporting children, adopters and birth families and sees this work as an integral part of maintaining positive outcomes for children in placement. This encourages inclusive and enabling practice. The quality, depth and range of the support provided, in addition to the uptake of the services and the positive impact on some of the users, are exceptional. The promotion of equality and diversity is good. There are some weaknesses; particularly regarding some aspects of the assessment of adopters and of the monitoring of the work of the adoption service.

Improvements since the last inspection

The previous inspection report of December 2005 lists nine statutory requirements and 11 good practice recommendations. To address them, the work of the adoption agency has been made more robust with improved procedures, strategies and

documentation; more comprehensive information for adopters; better access to specialist services for children; increased training opportunities; more timely assessments and decision making. The agency has taken effective steps to better promote diversity. The panel now acts as an effective quality assurance mechanism and adopters are always invited to attend. A disaster recovery plan is in place. There is now appropriate vetting of staff, although some minor omissions remain. The adoption team has expanded, but some performance issues have been apparent again. The previous inspection's finding, about lack of rigour in quality control, for some areas of adoption work, is identified again as an area for improvement.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

Overall, those touched by adoption receive a service that is sound. The authority has a range of good strategies and practices to promote children's welfare and to attract and support adopters who can provide successful stable placements. There are few, but significant weaknesses, particularly regarding some aspects of assessment of suitability of adopters.

Enquiries about adoption are welcomed without prejudice, responded to timely and given clear information about the process of recruitment, assessment and support. The agency's long term objective is to improve its capacity to meet placement needs, increasing the social and cultural diversity of its pool of prospective adopters. The strategy has been comprehensively reviewed, following the previous inspection and made more inclusive. For example, the authority is now more creative with advertisements; it has taken steps in raising awareness and understanding of disability, aiming to create better opportunities for all children to grow up as part of a loving family. There has been success in attracting enquiries from people from diverse cultural backgrounds and lifestyles.

Adopters are well prepared for their task. Preparation groups cover the relevant topics and are well managed. The feedback on performance from the groups is monitored to ensure that preparation continues to meet adopters' needs.

The practice of taking the formal application after preparation has recently ceased, in recognition that this was inconsistent with statutory guidance, impinged on rights of appeal and distorted the time scales for assessments. However, adoption social workers are not clear about adopters' entitlement to representation and determination of their application, should the authority decide not to continue the assessment after preparation. This means that they are less likely to properly advise adopters.

The agency works closely with other authorities in the local consortium and has clear procedures for using the national adoption register. This aims to ensure that children whose care plan is adoption do not suffer from undue delays. Nonetheless, there have been some protracted delays, regarding permanency. Delays have the potential to impinge negatively on the successful placements of children, although, on these occasions, the outcome was positive. Placements' stability has been good.

Field social workers give matching deep thought and consideration; however they do not find the family finding process, led by the adoption team, consistently able to demonstrate that decisions are appropriate and that delays are unavoidable.

Assessments of adopters are of variable quality, with some lacking sufficient evidence, detail or good analysis; there is good practice in routinely conducting second opinion visits. Appropriate checks are carried out on adopters to help assess their suitability. The home health and safety checklists completed for some adopters did not include an assessment of the storage of dangerous weapons or risks to young children from hanging cords on window blinds. The authority is now addressing this.

The panel acts as an additional and effective scrutiny tool and is prepared to defer cases when assessments are not good enough to enable sound recommendations.

There is much respect for the panel amongst stakeholders. For example, both field and adoption social workers said that presenting cases to panel is a positive experience. They find the panel to be fair, child focused and skilled at exploring issues of diversity. They said that they 'admire that panel defers cases if there is not enough information'; that the panel 'does not just rubber stamp, but really has the best interest of the child at heart'.

There is well considered decision making that is undertaken within the expected timescales. It is set at an appropriately senior level, so as to enable an objective view of each case.

Vetting of staff is in place to protect children and vulnerable adults, by ensuring that those working for the service are suitable. This is mostly robust, but there are some minor omissions in relation, mainly, to the records kept of checks. For example, the records of employment and education history for panel members are not detailed enough to evidence that gaps, if any, have been fully explored. There is no record to show that the original documents have been checked regarding staff's qualifications.

All social workers are qualified professionals and all have attended child protection courses and refreshers. However, administrative staff, who work for the purpose of adoption, although not based in the team, have not yet received such training. The authority is now considering making this available.

Robust systems are in place to manage complaints and allegations. However, the log

of complaints is not suitable to show patterns and to aid managerial review. The log is now being amended to ensure that it contains the appropriate information.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

People affected by adoption very much value what is offered and consider that they benefit from the service. The agency has been highly successful in its aim to provide effective post adoption support, with the needs of children and adopters being the focus of their work.

Overall, users receive an excellent service, guided by comprehensive support assessments; these are periodically reviewed, to ensure that they continue to meet needs well. There is very good attention to individual needs.

The quality, depth and range of what is provided, in addition to the uptake of the services and the positive impact on some of the users, are exceptional.

Users spoke of how sensitively and helpfully the work is being conducted; how quickly the authority responds; how effective the post adoption service is in following up requests for tracing or intermediary work. They spoke about the empathy that workers convey in this area and the genuine interest in the users' welfare. They made comments such as, for example: 'My social worker is amazing'. 'She is very helpful, really supported me, lovely. She even rings me and emails me just to ask how I am'.

Adoptive parents have access to an excellent range of resources to ensure good outcomes are achieved and maintained for children, so that they are well supported in providing stable and permanent homes. The preparation and training highlights the importance for the child's well-being to keep a sense of their life before adoption and to value diversity. Post adoption financial support is available, following a financial assessment and dependent on the needs of the child in placement.

As well as advice, information and counselling, which are offered through the post adoption workers, adopters benefit from a wide variety of support groups, workshops and other events. Many of these are organised through the consortium's advisory service (BAAS) and thus offer Bracknell's users many additional resources than they could get from one single authority.

For example, there are social events which have been well attended and which have provided a well received opportunity for the whole family to meet with other adoptive families. There are groups for adoptive fathers and adopted children or young people and there is an annual adopters' conference. BAAS contacts all adopted young people before their 18th birthday to discuss plans for contact. This allows adoptive parents to participate in the discussion and planning where appropriate

There is a range of specialist resources available to adopted children and their families, including medical, legal, educational and mental health services.

Health needs are explored and this enables adopters to be aware of the implications of these for them as a family. There is established good practice with detailed written legal counsel, prepared for panel meetings, in addition to attendance.

The authority considers the adopters' ability to promote children's life chances via educational attainment. A specialist education worker particularly engages with carers to think about the long-term issues and how to meet the young person's educational needs, as she or he moves through adolescence. Recently this function has been extended, through the post adoption service, to include adopted children, in recognition of the specific and different needs faced by adoptive families.

Stakeholders think highly of the support offered by the specialist advisors and say that they are skilled and knowledgeable about the adoption process.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Birth parents are very well supported at every stage of the adoption process and can be as involved as they want in planning for the future of their children.

There is a high level of confidence amongst stakeholders about the agency's successful work with birth families in the planning, sharing of information, matching and placing of children. Their views are seen as an integral part of achieving positive outcomes and great effort is made to enable birth families to express their wishes. This encourages inclusive and enabling practice that continues into the permanency planning meetings, linking meetings and child permanence reports, where the views of parents are recorded. Furthermore, wherever possible children are encouraged to take an active part in planning for permanence, including contributing to the profile drawn up at an early stage in the family finding process.

The agency successfully encourages birth families to contribute to life story work about the child's early life and their own background; this provides good quality information which helps adopters in supporting children to make sense of their history and heritage. In appropriate cases, birth families attend a one off meeting with the prospective adopters.

The level of engagement, as well as the range of opportunities and choices available for counselling and support, are exceptional, with evidence of users benefiting from the service.

For example, through BAAS, Bracknell Forest's birth parents have access to an independent service from when the decision is made that adoption is the plan for the child. This project is highly regarded and has a high engagement rate. The

consortium allows for a wide range of support groups, including for birth mothers, adopted adults, birth fathers and birth record counselling groups. BAAS has compiled written information about adoption for birth parents; this is also available in audio form, so as to offer birth parents the choice of accessing the information in the way that best suits them. Additionally, to ensure that social workers are well informed and confident in this more specialist area of work, BAAS runs a range of workshops and other training relating to services to birth families.

Adopters are made well aware of the importance of maintaining a connection through the letter box exchange. BAAS manages the letter box indirect contact arrangements and some direct contact to a high standard. BAAS seeks the views of all children involved in direct contact and provides age appropriate written information about post placement contact.

BAAS and the Bracknell post adoption workers provide effective and very sensitive practical support to birth parents, regarding any aspect of the contact arrangements.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

There is well qualified and experienced senior management, committed to run the service in the best interest of children, with an agenda of continuous improvement. There is good partnership with the other authorities in the Berkshire consortium, resulting in sharing of resources and good practice, with direct benefits for the users. This has enabled a service that is sound overall, but with a number of excellent strategies; for example, regarding the provision of support to those touched by adoption.

There is good scrutiny by members and excellent commitment to the corporate parenting role, which is recognised as being effective in promoting the rights of children and young people. For example, stakeholders said about the corporate parents' representatives: 'Very good and passionate; but open too. Will listen, give and accept feed-back, very child focused and really involving children and young people'.

There is a good training programme and encouragement for social workers in pursuing post qualifying awards.

There have been some gaps in the monitoring and controlling of some aspects of the work of the adoption service, which resulted in the areas for improvement identified

in safeguarding. The family placement team is small and with a diverse workload. The opportunities for building expertise in adoption have been, therefore, restricted. There have been performance issues, exacerbated by some recent significant sickness and by unsuccessful use of external assessors. The quality of supervision for adoption staff has been quite variable.

Field social workers receive good supervision from their managers and are well guided in aspects of adoption work by this and peers' support. However, they have lacked, at times, the specific guidance and information that a specialist adoption team is expected to provide.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Staff have training in equality and diversity issues. The authority carries out equality impact assessments for all new procedures, policies or resource provision. Recruitment uses material sensitive to equality and diversity. Second opinion reports on all adoption assessments provide another opportunity for ensuring that equality and diversity issues are addressed. Above all, the authority has been very successful at engaging birth parents and ensuring that their views and wishes are reflected in the adoption process.

There is statement of the aims and purpose of the adoption service, which informs users of what to expect; the authority is planning to rectify any inaccuracies when the statement is next reviewed.

Files are kept securely and with due regard for confidentiality.

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
4	ensure that all prospective adopters are involved in a thorough and comprehensive assessment. (The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005. Regulation 25)	28/09/2009
20	ensure that staff are organised and managed in a way which delivers an effective service (The Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003. Regulation 6)	28/09/2009
21	ensure that there is an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff, receiving regular quality supervision and support, to meet the needs of the adoption agency. (The Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003, Regulation 10)	28/09/2009

Recommendations

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

- ensure that planning meetings for family finding and matching make good use of the professionals involved (NMS 2)
- ensure that child protection training is updated for all those working for the purpose of adoption. (NMS 32)
- ensure that records retain evidence that all required checks have been satisfactorily completed for all those working for the purpose of adoption (NMS 19)