

Torbay 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

Torbay Council's 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 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. The service operates and maintains a letter box system, which supports the exchange of information in adoption placements.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This statutory inspection visit was undertaken as an announced key inspection. All key national minimum standards were inspected. The inspectors found the service is now operating to a satisfactory standard overall. It has made good progress in addressing statutory requirements and good practice recommendations made at the previous inspection visit in June 2007.

The service is reflective in practice and well aware of the areas in which further improvement is needed. The management team has been strengthened. Although the manager of the service still has a very substantial remit, there is a strong senior management team now in place to assist with the planning and development of the service. Communication between teams, support for social workers working with children whose plan is adoption, management oversight of adoption planning and the development the adoption support services have all substantially improved.

The service is still not fully staffed, which with an increasing demand for adoption support services, is putting some strain on response times. However, the commitment to improvement and direction of travel towards providing a good quality of service overall are now clear.

Improvements since the last inspection

The service has made good progress in addressing the 8 statutory requirements and 11 recommendations made at the previous inspection visit in June 2007. The service has taken effective action to meet five statutory requirements made relating to written information and plans, policies and procedures and training for staff. The

service now has a written plan in place for the implementation and evaluation of its adoption recruitment strategies. It has also produced satisfactory written policies and procedures for the handling of the functions of the adoption panel and safeguarding of children in adoption placements. The Statement of Purpose has been amended and updated so that it reflects the current functions of the service. Social workers working for the service are being supported to achieve post qualification awards. The service has made good progress towards meeting the remaining three statutory requirements made at the previous inspection visit. These related to the management and staffing levels in the service and adoption panel members' files. The management of the service has been significantly reinforced by the appointment of an additional manager to manage the adoption support team. There has also been an increase in the staffing complement in all parts of the service, including the recruitment and assessment team, the adoption support team and the administrative support team. The authority has also introduced a market supplement pay award to improve recruitment and retention of social workers. There has been satisfactory progress made regarding the information that is required to be held on adoption panel members' files. However, there are still some minor shortfalls in this area.

The service has taken effective action to meet nine of the eleven recommendations made at the previous inspection visit. These relate to systems for monitoring and improving the quality of the service provided; the delegation of management responsibilities; the application process; access to services; the management and operation of adoption panel. Effective action has been to strengthen the management of the service by delegating some of the tasks and responsibilities to two new management roles, namely, a new manager of the adoption support service and a new social work senior practitioner to support child care social workers who are working with children whose plan is adoption. This, coupled with additional training and written guidance for social workers, has improved the quality of report writing, particularly in child permanence reports. Additional training and support provided to social workers and more focussed management oversight of life story work has brought about a significant improvement in this area. Employers' references are now obtained as part of the adoption application process so that children are safeguarded. Adoption panel members' awareness and knowledge of issues relating to equality and diversity, and inter-country adoption, is enhanced through the training provided. There is now a good focus on ensuring that adoption panel meetings generally run to time so that applicants attending panel are not subjected to unacceptable delays on the day. Adoption panel minutes now outline the deliberations of panel members and what areas of clarification are being sought. 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, has been introduced. The service now has very good links with the child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) so that adopters and adopted children and young people can easily access these services if they need to. Additionally, good support is available from the authority's Specialist Assessment and Therapy Service (SATS).

There are two areas where the service has made progress in addressing the recommendations made at the previous inspection visit, but there are still minor shortfalls. These are administrative support for the service and auditing of case files.

Whilst resources for administrative support have been increased, the amount of administrative support time has not kept pace with the increase in social work staff, or with the increase in demand for adoption support services. Audits of case files are being undertaken more regularly now. However, a systematic approach is not yet embedded.

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.

The service is now well-focussed on meeting the needs of children whose plan is adoption, safeguarding and promoting the welfare of service users. The service's staff demonstrate a strong level of commitment and dedication to their tasks and responsibilities with a child-focussed approach that fully recognises that the needs, welfare and safety of the child are at the centre of the adoption process. There is a good focus on matching children with adopters who best meet their assessed needs. Good and effective communication about children's needs is now maintained between the children's services teams and the adoption teams, both at a managerial and practitioner level, with good arrangements for joint working across the service now in place. A social worker from another local authority working with the service said that it, 'fulfilled the side of what it was doing well' and that staff, 'were very keen to find out the whole' and 'get on with things'. This social worker also said that the service 'did all it could to minimise delay', was 'very prompt about giving information' and that there had been, 'no gaps' in the service provided.

Since the last inspection visit, the service has developed a written recruitment plan aimed at meeting the needs of children whose plan is adoption. There are clear and well-established processes to deal with enquiries. Adopters confirmed that their enquiries were welcomed without prejudice and that they were treated with sensitivity, particularly at the initial point of contact, by friendly, informative and knowledgeable staff. However, whilst the recruitment strategy has been successful in terms of numbers of applications received, it is not sufficiently developed in terms of attracting applications across all sectors of the community. The range of diversity of approved adopters in the locality has not been wide enough to provide good choices in matching locally, or to prevent delays in matching, for some children who have diverse needs. However, approved adopters who are waiting for a child to be placed with them reported that the service is good at keeping them informed about children waiting for adoption. One of these adopters said, 'We are very appreciative of the time and effort of our social worker in keeping us informed'.

The preparation, training and assessment of prospective adopters is thorough and of a generally good standard. Assessments reports are generally well-written and cover

all the required areas. However, analysis of applicants' strengths and weaknesses as prospective adoptive parents is not always detailed enough, but this is improving. The service is currently revising its policy and procedure for dealing with applications from foster carers who wish to apply to adopt a child they are caring for in response to a recent complaint, which highlighted a weakness in this area. Adopters reported that the preparation course for prospective adopters is good and that they found it to be helpful and informative. Comments from adopters about the preparation course included: 'We enjoyed the prep course. It was challenging and informative. We had the opportunity to discuss and consider every aspect of adoption and the social workers who ran the course were superb in enabling all of us to think about how we felt. We were given the chance to ask any questions we had and always received full and frank responses' and 'We feel the preparation was well thought out and planned. There was a good balance in terms of the "challenges" and "rewards" of becoming an adopter'. Regarding the approval process, adopters said: 'The approval process involved a lot of questions but these were asked in a sensitive way, always put into context when necessary and thus never felt over-intrusive. There were no unacceptable delays. We were always kept informed about what was going on and what would happen next', 'We can't speak highly enough about how we were guided through the process leading up to approval. Our social worker and the team were professional and supportive and we were kept fully informed about the process and what was happening' and 'We felt this prepared us well and was appropriately thorough. There were no unnecessary delays in our approval and we were informed throughout and given appropriate time to reflect'.

The adoption panel is suitably constituted. A written policy and procedure about the handling of the functions of panel is now in place. Applicants are invited to and made welcome at panel meetings. They feel well prepared for this. Meetings are effectively chaired and generally now keep well to time. Some adopters also feel that the reception they receive on their arrival and the waiting area could be improved. The panel is conscientious about its quality assurance function. Panel members give appropriate and rigorous scrutiny to applications and provide feedback on the quality of cases being presented to ensure that service delivery is consistent and of good quality. Panel minutes now clearly record the panel's deliberations, its recommendations and the reasons for these. The agency decision-maker ensures that the agency decision is taken without delay and that all information surrounding the case and the panel's recommendation are taken into account before making a considered and professional decision. Applicants are very speedily informed of the agency's decision both verbally and in writing.

The managers and staff of the agency are all appropriately qualified and experienced and demonstrate a high level of knowledge and understanding of adoption issues, legislation and current practice. Recruitment practice is sound and generally satisfactory. However, all checks are not fully evidenced in staff files. For example, inspectors were told by managers that telephone enquiries to confirm written references are being undertaken before staff are appointed but there was no written evidence of this in staff files sampled. Employers' references for applicants are now being routinely obtained.

There is now a suitable safeguarding policy and procedure in place. Staff confirmed that they receive updates in safeguarding training.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service has a coherent approach to preparing and supporting adopters so that children are provided with stable and secure adoptive placements. The service provides good support to adopters through all stages, matching, introductions, placement and post-placement. This includes access to specialist advice and the introduction of an adoption support worker at an early stage in placement, rather than post adoption. All of the adopters who responded to the pre-inspection questionnaire survey said they were satisfied with how the placement was made. Comments from these adopters included, 'Social worker and manager fully in control of the process, which was much needed' and 'Introductions week well planned and social workers listened to evolving needs during week and adjusted where needed'. Adopters are clear about contact arrangements and feel that these are well managed. Adopters are provided with a variety of support services, for example post-approval training, newsletters, adoption support groups and social events. The adoption support team has been expanded to meet a growing demand for adoption support services. Adopters who had received therapy support said that they had found this to be, 'very helpful'. There is a low level of disruptions of adoptive placements, which indicates that matching processes and support provided are effective. All of the adopters who responded to the questionnaire survey said that they are satisfied with the support they receive after a child is placed. They said, 'We have had regular visits from both social workers and have felt supported and able to phone if necessary as well'. 'Good support, social worker very professional and efficient' and 'The support we have received from our social worker and the rest of the adoption team in Torbay has been first class'.

The service has access to specialist advisers and services appropriate to its needs. Some of these are well established. For example, the Medical Adviser to the panel has been in post for a number of years. She liaises well with children's social workers and meets with most prospective adopters to try to ensure that adopters are provided with all necessary information about specific health issues of children. There is a legal adviser available for consultation by staff and the adoption panel. Liaison with the child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) has been strengthened so that adoptive families' access to this service has been streamlined and improved.

People affected by adoption receive a good service that is appropriate and tailored to their particular need. They are treated fairly, openly and with respect throughout their contact with the agency. They are given clear information about the service they can expect to receive. All of the birth relatives receiving support from the birth relative advisory service who responded to the questionnaire survey said that they got a good response when they first had contact with this service. They also confirmed that this service took account of any special needs they have in its contact with them. Most of these birth relatives said that this service is 'always' easy to

contact. Comments from these birth relatives included, 'They were always there when I needed them', 'They always rang back if they weren't in the office' and 'I cannot fault them'. All of the birth relatives who responded to the questionnaire survey said that they had found the birth relatives advisory service to be helpful to them. They also said that they are listened to and are treated with respect. All of the birth relatives who responded to the questionnaire survey said that they had been told about how to make a complaint. One said that they when they had needed to make a complaint, they had been helped to do so. Demand for adoption support services is growing and the service is struggling to keep pace with this. As a result, there is a waiting list for some services.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The service is now well-focussed on providing good support to birth parents and birth families so that they are involved, whenever possible, in adoption plans. All of the birth relatives who responded to the questionnaire survey said that the service involved them in the planning of the child's adoption. With regard to the birth relatives advisory service, one of these birth relatives commented, 'I felt I could rely on them all the time'. The quality of child permanence reports has improved with birth parents' views about adoption and contact now more clearly recorded. The birth relative advisory service also offers good support to birth relatives to assist them to be involved in putting together material for the child's life story book, which helps to maintain the child's heritage. One birth relative, who has received support from the birth relative advisory service whilst compiling information for children being adopted and also with post-adoption contact, described the adoption support team staff as reliable, compassionate and supportive at all times. This person said that, 'I felt that I could say what I wanted' and that 'nothing was too much trouble for them'. However, the demand for independent birth relatives support is outstripping the adoption support team's current capacity to take up referrals. There is currently a short waiting list for this service, which means that sometimes birth parents do not have access to a support worker independent of the child's social worker from the time adoption is identified as the plan for the child.

The quality and provision of life story books to adopters at an appropriate point in the placement process has improved but there is still some variance in this. Children's social workers are being given better training and support in this area of work with the result that the quality of life story work is improving generally.

The service helps to maintain the child's heritage through a well-managed letterbox system. Contact arrangements are planned and agreed, the system is efficiently administered and there are systems in place to ensure the content is appropriate. There are leaflets provided to participants and help in writing letters can be provided wherever necessary.

Service users said that they receive good quality services based on their needs. All of the birth relatives who responded to the questionnaire survey said that the service

explained what it could do and what it could not do. They also said that the service was good at answering any questions and giving reasons for any delays. Comments from birth relatives about the quality of the service they received from the birth relative advisory service included, 'They said they would "be there" for me and they have not let me down' and 'The social workers and managers are fantastic in every way. Unfortunately it's the system that fails. But social workers get blamed. Our workers were very helpful and sympathetic on our circumstances and extremely supportive and caring'. The service has also introduced two successful support groups for children and young people affected by adoption, a group for adopted young people and a group for children looked after who have a sibling who has been adopted, in response to expressed and assessed need.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The Statement of Purpose is up-to-date and reflects the service's aims, objectives and services provided. Some of the policies and procedures, which underpin the operation and strategic direction of the service have been reviewed and updated since the previous inspection visit also. There are children's guides in place, which with other resources are used to inform and prepare children for adoption.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Services are user-focused and tailored to meet individual needs. Service users report that contact they have with the service is non-discriminatory and that they were treated with sensitivity and respect. The service has completed an equality and diversity impact assessment, which identifies areas of shortfall. Staff are provided with good support and training in this area.

People who are interested in knowing more about becoming adoptive parents are given clear written information about the process and the needs of children who are requiring an adoptive family. Adopters report that information they receive from the service is useful and informative.

The managers of the adoption service are appropriately skilled, qualified and experienced in adoption and childcare. Managers demonstrated a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities and a strong commitment to developing the service. Staff spoke highly of their managers and feel that there is good leadership of the service. However, the service manager still has a wide remit, which has potential for a conflict of interest to arise. She is responsible for the management of the adoption recruitment team with direct line management responsibility for the work of assessing social workers presenting prospective

adopters applications to adoption panel. At the same time, she is the agency advisor to the adoption panel.

There are now more robust quality assurance systems in place to monitor the service's performance. Systems to ensure cooperative working across the service are more focussed on avoiding delays for children whose plan is adoption. There is more acknowledged commitment to adoption as a positive choice for permanence for children across the service as a whole. Reports on the performance of the adoption service are produced twice a year.

Case records are well-organised and generally well-maintained. The service is moving towards electronic recording. Files are being audited more regularly. Case files now contain evidence of case supervision decisions. There are written policies and procedures in place in respect of case recording and access to records.

Staff in the adoption teams are knowledgeable about adoption and the needs of people affected by adoption. There is a good commitment to staff training and development, including access to, and support for, higher level professional qualifications. Since the previous inspection, there has been expansion in all adoption service teams, as well as investment in additional management support to improve service delivery and development. However, despite several attempts at recruitment, the adoption recruitment team is still not fully staffed with an unfilled qualified social worker post. Also, with a continuing increase in demand for adoption support services, the adoption support team is currently working to capacity. Even with the additional resources that have been put into place since the last inspection visit, there is a waiting list for some aspects of the service. The commitment, dedication and flexibility of the administrative support team is recognised and highly valued by managers and social work staff but they feel that the team is over-stretched, with the adoption support service particularly in need of additional administrative support time. Annual appraisals are not being completed for all staff within the adoption service.

Staff and panel members' files are well ordered. They contain evidence of CRB checks, photographic identity checks and written references. However, files do not contain all the information required, for example, gaps in employment history were found. Also, there is no evidence on staff files that telephone checks on written references are being undertaken. Interview notes had been retained and sent to the human resources department, but only the most recent had been kept.

There is a plan to accommodate the adoption service within the new corporate centre planned in Torquay. The current premises used to store archive records is secure, but the storage room is cramped, has exceeded capacity and presents a number of health and safety issues for staff working there. The office accommodation used by the adoption recruitment team and adoption support team provides good quality accommodation for staff, but has limited facilities for public access. Interview rooms are accessed through the open plan office, which could compromise confidentiality, for example, during telephone conversations. Waiting facilities for applicants attending panel meetings are limited to a small cramped

room, which some adopters commented on unfavourably. However, waiting facilities have improved since the last inspection visit.

Plans to back up adoption records electronically are making slow progress due to the need to ensure that this work is implemented safely and securely. The contract for the work has now been agreed and is due to begin in January 2010. The authority does have a disaster recovery plan in place to provide guidance in the event of unforeseen mishaps affecting the premises and records.

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):

- endeavour to widen the diversity of approved adopters available locally so that there is a wider choice available when matching children with adopters who can best meet their needs (breach of national minimum standard 2)
- continue to develop effective strategies to ensure that children are matched and placed without delay with adopters who best meet their assessed needs (breach of national minimum standard 2)
- ensure that there is evidence on staff files to confirm that telephone enquiries were made to each referee to verify written references (breach of national minimum standard 19)
- ensure that there are sufficient resources in place to respond promptly to the requests of and work with people affected by adoption (breach of national minimum standard 33)
- ensure that, in all cases, birth parents have access to a support worker independent of the child's social worker from the time adoption is identified as the plan for the child (breach of national minimum standard 7)
- ensure that there are no potential conflicts of interest in management roles and responsibilities, particularly in relation to the role of agency adviser to the adoption panel (breach of national minimum standard 16)
- continue efforts to recruit sufficient staff to meet the needs of the service (breach of national minimum standard 21)
- ensure that all staff involved in adoption work are receiving appraisals, which identify training and development needs (breach of national minimum standard 23)
- ensure that personnel files for all staff contain all the required information detailed in Schedule 3, including a full employment history and proof of identity (breach of regulation 11(3)(d))
- review the premises available to ensure that they are suitable for purpose, particularly in relation to storage space for archived records, interview facilities for adults affected by adoption and premises used for adoption panel meetings (breach of national minimum standard 29)

- implement plans for safeguarding and backing-up archived records. (breach of national minimum standard 29)