

Reading Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

Unique reference number	SC056833
Inspection date	09/07/2010
Inspector	Mike Stapley
Type of inspection	Key

Setting address	Reading Borough Council, PO Box 2624, READING, RG1 7WB
Telephone number	0118 955 3740
Email	
Registered person	Reading Borough Council
Registered manager	Corienne Strange
Responsible individual	Anna Wright
Date of last inspection	30/10/2006

© Crown copyright 2010

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

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 adoption agency of the borough of Reading operates all the statutory duties it carries responsibility for under current legislation. This includes: the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters; the matching and placement of children with suitable families; support to people who have been affected by adoption.

The service operates from accessible premises on the outskirts of Reading.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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 extremely good. The promotion of equality and diversity is good.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last social care inspection of the adoption service, in 2006, resulted in five statutory requirements and eleven recommendations. The requirements related to: the agency commencing the adoption preparation course prior to the completion of the application form; staff recruitment and safeguarding training. The recommendations related to: the recruitment strategy of adopters; health and safety checklist; panel minute extracts; staff recruitment; adopters medicals; birth parents having an opportunity of reading what is written about them in documentation; Statement of Purpose; information packs for adopters and monitoring systems. The agency devised a management 'action plan' and has acted upon most of these requirements and recommendations although the recommendations regarding recruitment are not fully met and have been repeated.

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 agency demonstrates a good awareness of the children who require adoptive families, which enables it to undertake appropriate recruitment activity. There is a clear, written recruitment strategy which details a number of methods used to attract potential adopters. There are formalised procedures to ensure that any child who may require an adoptive family is referred to the adoption team in a timely way, good monitoring processes are in place to prevent drift and the evidence shows that children are placed without undue delay. Social workers commented that there is a sense of urgency to progress children's plans and family finding is a priority. Children who are of an age to express their views have those taken into account. The needs of children are highlighted through a formalised meeting with the child's social worker and the family finder, and appropriate consideration is given to placing children with their siblings and with a family who meet their cultural, ethnic and religious needs.

The recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters is a well thought out and comprehensive process. The adoption team hold information evenings every six weeks, which give enquirers the opportunity to raise any particular issues. This is then followed up by an initial home visit by the assistant team manager from the adoption team. If enquirers' interest is accepted, they are asked to complete a formal application prior to being invited to the next preparation training course. The preparation training is thorough and adopters say it is very useful. The agency undertakes robust checks including former partners, employers and other local authorities. There is also a comprehensive health and safety checklist which has recently been reviewed to include poisonous plants. This process ensures as far as possible that the adoptive parents are appropriately safe to care for children.

Assessments are analytical and competency-based; to ensure potential adopters have the appropriate parenting skills and resilience to meet the challenges of the adoption task. It is focussed, documented and presented to the adoption panel as part of the assessment. Adopters described their assessing social workers as 'very good' and 'organised, excellent and sensitive'.

The agency has a good, well thought out, formalised process for the matching, linking and introduction of children to their adoptive family. Adopters are given clear information about this process, and are made aware of the National Adoption Register and the Berkshire Advisory Adoption Service (BAAS). Adopters confirmed they received sufficient information to enable them to make an informed decision about whether the proposed placement is right for them and had the opportunity to

meet foster carers, the medical adviser and any other relevant person. Once a placement is agreed, adopters sign a placement undertaking which outlines their duties and responsibilities to the child and the agency.

The agency has a comprehensive set of policies and procedures which relate to the operation of the adoption panel. Adopters are invited to attend the panel, both for their approval and for matching, and are given information both verbally and in writing, to ensure they know what to expect. Adopters confirmed that they were made welcome and listened to.

The panel is appropriately constituted with a range of members who offer a variety of skills and experience. The recruitment checks are appropriate, there is evidence that they observe the panel prior to commencing as a voting member, undertake an induction and have ongoing training. The panel meets regularly, with the facility to hold extra panels if necessary, and there is no evidence that children's plans are delayed through the inability to obtain a panel date. They are well-administered, papers are sent out in good time to enable panel members to read them and be prepared, and the minutes are full and reflect the discussion and the reasons.

The agency decision maker takes her role seriously and has access to all the information to enable her to make her decision in a considered manner. The decision is made within the necessary timescales although letters to adopters and birth parents need to be amended to ensure they are appropriately worded and reflect the recommendations made by the adoption panel and the decisions made by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM).

All of the staff and the manager have up to date Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks and are appropriately qualified and experienced. However, not all of the documentation required in the regulations was evident for some of the staff. This included a lack of written references and formal application form. In addition some recruitment documentation had not been signed off on individual staff personnel files. Staff have access to a range of relevant training including post qualification training.

The safeguarding procedures make specific reference to children placed for adoption and staff are trained in these procedures on an ongoing basis. This promotes a workforce which is safe and suitable to provide a strong adoption service to children and families.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency has a well-planned, strong and committed approach to supporting its adopters, both before and after an adoption order is made. This process starts during their preparation for approval, and once approved, adopters describe their social workers as very easy to contact and extremely supportive.

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 Reading's service users many additional resources than they might get from one single authority.

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

The agency are planning to hold events for adopters at least on an annual basis, such as a picnic to enable adopters and children to come together for a fun day. This will hopefully help to promote links between adopters and children for further support and enjoyment.

There is a systematic approach to analysing the support needs of adopters and the issues they may experience and the support packages which may need to be put into place.

The agency provides excellent financial support packages to its adopters to enable placements to be made and to continue. This includes ongoing financial support for children with particular needs. The agency will in certain circumstances, offer financial support to enable adopters to build an extension to their house. Adoption Support plans clearly identify a child's educational needs and the type of education provision that would best meet the child's needs, including any financial support that is required to meet such needs.

Children placed for adoption receive a good service from the child and adolescent mental health services team (CAMHS), which has a multi-disciplinary team, including specialist workers, for looked after children. This team can provide a prompt response to referrals they receive and works in partnership with social workers in both the adoption team and the children's teams and provide consultation to adopters and staff. Adopters commented that they worked well together and felt it was a 'joined up' service.

Legal and medical advice is of a good standard. The legal adviser specialises in adoption and gives useful updates to staff and the adoption panel on case law. Both these advisers are an invaluable asset to the overall processes of adoption and adoption support.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency shows a commitment to the lifelong implications of adoption for the birth family, which is acted upon in practice. Birth parents are involved in contributing to the planning for their children and consulted about their wishes and feelings. Where possible, these are recorded on the Child Permanence Report (CPR). Children's views

are also sought where appropriate and recorded on the CPR. Birth parents are offered the opportunity to access support from the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service (BAAS) from the time that adoption is identified as the plan for the child.

All children placed for adoption have a life journey book which their adoptive parents can go through with them at age appropriate levels throughout their lives to help them to understand their history. Children who are of an appropriate age and understanding are also encouraged to contribute towards their life journey book. Birth parents and other family members, where appropriate are encouraged to contribute to their child's life journey book and write letters that can be shared with the child at an appropriate time.

The agency provides life journey book training and has a range of age appropriate books, toys and activities for direct work with children. The independent reviewing officers monitor life journey books at the children's statutory case reviews to ensure that they are not only complete but are of a high quality.

There is a robust letterbox system in place which is managed by Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service (BAAS). There is evidence to show that the agency provide a very effective service for birth parents. The agency ensures all contacts are acknowledged and copied and assistance is given with letter writing, which includes written guidance and practical help. In addition the agency can support birth parents if they receive letters that cause difficulty by offering help and advice. The agency co-ordinates direct contact between adopted children and their birth families where this is part of the adoption support plan and there was evidence of very sensitive work with birth parents, children and adopters in relation to this. In addition the agency offers adopters the opportunity to meet with birth parents if appropriate and if it will not jeopardise the adoptive placement. Adopters have found this to be helpful as it assists in talking to the child about their birth parents as they grow up.

The agency also demonstrates their commitment to adopted adults. There are numerous leaflets which give advice and guidance on how to initiate contact with adopted relatives and information on tracing. The agency offers a birth records counselling service to adopted adults who live in Reading who want information about their birth family. One member of the adoption team is mainly involved in this work, which is carried out with great sensitivity.

Overall the agency offers a wide range of post adoption and other services that are well used by service users. One stated that the social workers at the preparation group 'were fantastic at this and every request or question was dealt with in a professional and timely way'. While another commented that 'We found that everyone involved were very professional at all times. Reading were extremely thorough and supportive with their involvement. We felt comfortable and able to approach all social workers involved with our case. All relevant information was given and we feel that it (adoption) was a positive experience.'

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The Statement of Purpose is comprehensive, informative and easy to read, and taken in conjunction with the underpinning policies and procedures, provides a clear framework and direction for the operation of the agency. The children's guide, given in conjunction with the complaints leaflet, meets the requirements of the regulations. All documents can be translated into other languages and this is made clear. Applicants receive good, clear written information at various stages of the process which enables them to be aware of what should happen next. Adopters commented that this was useful and they were clear about the children who need adoptive families. They report that Reading is very welcoming and has a good understanding of diversity issues.

The agency is well managed at all levels. There is an effective, strategic approach to improving outcomes for children which is supported by the operational activities. The management team have appropriate skills, qualifications, knowledge and experience and this is backed up by enthusiasm and commitment to the work of the agency and outcomes for children. There are clear lines of accountability and good communication, both between the management team and the staff group. The executive is committed and kept informed of the agency's activities through written reports and monitoring systems. These mechanisms ensure there is good and effective scrutiny of the service.

The agency has an appropriate number and range of staff to enable the service to run according to its Statement of Purpose. Staff demonstrate significant levels of knowledge, skill and experience of working with children and in adoption. They are well supported in their work through regular supervision and support to undertake training.

There are sufficient administrative staff to support the work of the service, other staff commented that they were 'invaluable' and 'supportive'. Their skills are well utilised to provide a good quality of written and other materials and they are seen as very much part of the team.

Staff state that Reading is a good place to work, being child-focused and supportive, and many staff, particularly those at a senior level have worked for the authority for a number of years. The turnover of staff is very low and efforts are made to retain staff through various means including flexible working arrangements.

All staff receive regular and effective supervision from their managers. The adoption

team have good peer support and opportunities for external consultation when they are undertaking specialised pieces of work for complex cases, which shows a commitment to supporting staff and to ensuring work is carried out to a good, professional standard. Training needs are highlighted through the appraisal system and access to training is good. External training can be more difficult to access because of the cost, but the manager is committed to supporting her staff in accessing this where possible.

Case records on adopters and children are reasonably well organised and allow relatively easy access to information, as they are indexed and provide basic information at the front. Records are for the most part signed, dated and legible and there is evidence of decisions signed off by management. Files are monitored on a regular basis by management and any shortfalls are discussed in supervision. Comprehensive policies and procedures are in place which detail the expectations of recording, security arrangements, confidentiality and access to records. Personnel files are for the most part well organised and demonstrate a rigorous approach to the recruitment and selection of staff, including a very clear system for the recording of telephone verification of references, which is consistently implemented. Reference has already been made in the report regarding documentation missing from recruitment files, and unsigned documentation in individual staff files.

The premises are appropriate for the needs of the service and are identifiable and accessible to the public. The IT systems are secure and there is a good business continuity plan in place. Adoption records are archived within storage facilities designed to keep the most sensitive data and documents safe and protected from environmental risks.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The agency has a dedicated cultural adviser for children in care and her views and advice are sought at various stages of planning for a child to be placed for adoption. In addition she runs regular training for Children's Services staff and adoption panel members. The efforts to recruit a diverse range of adopters is impressive and creative wherever possible, the staff team is seen to promote diversity and there is a strong approach throughout the authority to promote inclusion.

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):

- ensure that the adoption panel consider the arrangements which the agency proposes to make for allowing any person contact with the child. (Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, Regulation 18/NMS 7)
- ensure that all required recruitment documentation is obtained for members of

- staff and panel members (NMS 19)
- ensure that the letters sent to prospective adopters from the agency confirms that the decision maker is approving the recommendation of the adoption panel. (Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, Regulation 27/NMS13)