

Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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Inspector	Julia Toller / Jacqueline Malcolm
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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 Adoption Services are placed within the children's services team. The service is provided by a small central team currently based in the centre of Maidenhead. The service provides for the recruitment, preparation, assessment, matching, introductions and the placement of children with 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 also provides support to adopters and adopted children 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. 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.

This is a good service overall with some aspects of outstanding practice within the outcome areas. A significant strength is the calibre of staff at all levels. They are committed, enthusiastic, knowledgeable and skilled. They work together as a team to provide a very child-focused and integrated approach to placing and supporting children within their adoptive families.

Matching, introduction and placing children with suitable adopters are carried out very well to ensure children's needs are well met by adopters who understand the challenges they may bring. There is a range of flexible support to sustain placements, help children enjoy and achieve, promote their self-esteem and reach their full potential.

Of particular note is the service to birth families. There is a real commitment to involving birth families in the plans for their children, obtaining information for children, supporting birth families so they understand what is happening and promoting effective contact arrangements. This is of significant benefit to children because it means they have a real and ongoing understanding of their heritage.

As a result of this inspection visit there are two recommendations. The first relates to

addressing the gap in some staff supervision records. The second relates to the lack of robust quality monitoring systems. Neither of these areas negatively impact on the existing positive outcomes for children.

Improvements since the last inspection

One requirement regarding deferments at the adoption panel and five recommendations about breaches of confidentiality, life story books, quality of reports and adopter's checks were made at the last inspection. These have all been satisfactorily implemented and significantly improve the service provided to children and families.

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 work of the adoption service helps keep children safe and well cared for. Assessments of adopters assure their suitability and ability to care for children. Placements are well matched and very well supported. Adopters and children receive support and advice in safety matters. For example, adopters say they can contact the service whenever necessary for advice and guidance. Additionally, a great deal of work is done with regard to parenting children with emotional difficulties and challenging behaviours. Work is done with members of adopters' support networks to help them understand and support adoptive placements.

Children's health is very well supported. Good child health information and excellent support and advice are provided by the authority's medical advisers. The service utilises the service of 'healthy minds' which provides an excellent resource for children their families and carers.

Matching of children with adopters is robust and timely. Minimal delays are experienced, effective working arrangements mean that children are usually placed within 12 months of the decision that they should be adopted. Social workers liaise effectively to identify proposed matches between children and adopters as early as possible. Proposed matches are thoroughly explored and considered along with any support identified as necessary. Transition plans to introduce children to their new families are excellent and well thought out and children and adopters are well prepared for and supported throughout this process.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Children benefit from excellent support to help them enjoy and achieve. The service provides intensive, focused work to help children develop positive relationships with their adopters throughout the matching and transition process. This work continues after the child is placed. For example, preparation work with children includes life story work and therapy including play therapy. Introductions and transitions to adoptive families are managed in a structured way that helps develop attachments and reduce trauma. Good, child focused information is available to adopters who are well supported to maintain routines and activities that are important to children and provide positive new experiences.

The BAAS runs post approval training for adopters. This includes subject areas, such as contact, explaining adoption and various 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, which is well attended.

A wide range of support services are available to children and their adoptive families on an ongoing basis. These are either provided directly by the workers from the adoption service or are commissioned by the service where necessary. For example, play therapy, sensory attachment intervention work, training on talking to children about adoption and parenting training can be provided by the authority's staff. Excellent support and training in therapeutic parenting, attachment and behaviour management provides adopters with effective strategies to help them manage children's behaviour in a positive and safe manner. Children benefit from ongoing support to their adopters. This supports positive relationships and empowers children to manage their own behaviour.

Support is clearly focused on delivering positive outcomes that meet children's individual needs. Social workers within the adoption team all have responsibility for elements of this support at different stages of the adoption process. Good and effective communication between workers ensures that adopters and children receive a service that is seamless, individualised and focused on their needs.

The agency works effectively with education services to ensure that adopted children receive the education they need. There is good joint working at a strategic level that delivers excellent support for children. For example, adopted children receive excellent support to get into the most appropriate schools. The adoption team works with the education service and schools to help them understand and work with children who have been adopted.

The BAAS service provides similarly excellent levels of support for people requesting post adoption support. Work is undertaken in line with effective assessment and is regularly reviewed. Intermediary services are very well managed. The service is able

to respond promptly to requests for birth records and provides good counselling and tracing services to help the increasing number of people who request this service.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The adoption service 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 child's permanence report. 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.

The BAAS also operates and manages the letterbox system on behalf of the service 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, and a birth fathers' group. 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'.

The authority consults with children and listens to their views. It provides a wide range of events and activities for adopted children and their families at which their views can be sought. Information provided to children about adoption is good. The child's adoption pack is particularly good, providing a lot of information that will be of use to children as they grow up, including how to express concerns and consult advocacy services.

Social workers and professionals who undertake direct work with children spend a lot of time working with children to help them to prepare for their adoption so that their views can be reflected in their plans. Children's views are taken into account in the

matching and transition processes and reviews effectively capture children's opinions. Children's care plans are produced for them in child-friendly formats so that they can be helped to understand what is happening to them. Children receive very good support to help them develop the emotional resilience to understand their background and the reasons why they were adopted. Work to help children develop positive attachments, play therapy and life story work play a major role in this work, and additional support is provided where needed.

Children receive good information about their backgrounds and birth families. Excellent work is carried out with birth families to include them in the plans for the adoption of their child. In addition adopters say the involvement of birth parents in their training helps them to understand the backgrounds of some children that may lead to adoption. Child permanence reports are very well written and contain appropriate information in an accessible form. Staff make great efforts to seek out information for children from their birth families, but where this is not available actively seek appropriate information that will be helpful for children as they grow up. Child permanence reports are supported by a range of information including parenting assessments, psychologist reports and viability assessments of other birth family members which provide additional information for later life reference. Life story books are produced to a high standard and in a timely manner, which help children to understand their backgrounds and heritage.

The service provides very good support to enable children to maintain contact with people important to them where this is agreed. Letterbox contact is well managed with appropriate support provided where necessary. The authority provides well-planned and managed packages of support to allow direct contact where this is appropriate. For example, direct contact between adopted children and their birth relatives can be supported. Complex arrangements provide practical and emotional supervision and support when contact between adopted siblings takes place. Similarly the work carried out with birth parents to maintain this contact is extensive. Again this acknowledges the benefits of this contact for children in answering any questions they may have in later life.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The adoption service places an individual value on all people it deals with who are affected by adoption. It recruits a range of adopters to meet the diverse needs of children who need families. Assessments consider applicants' ability to care for children in a non-discriminatory manner and to promote equality and diversity. Matches are made carefully taking

into account detailed information about the backgrounds of both parties. Outstanding individualised support is provided to adopted children and their families with support also provided to birth parents. This support helps ensure that adoption meets children's needs and increases their opportunities and life chances.

The adoption service has a clear Statement of Purpose which accurately describes the service and its operation. This is underpinned by appropriate policies and procedures which guide practice.

The recruitment of prospective adopters is undertaken on the basis of a sound understanding of the needs of children needing families. Assessments of prospective adopters are rigorous and careful. As a result approved adopters are well suited to children's needs and well prepared to care for children.

The adoption panel is managed and administered by BAAS. Clearly written adoption panel policies and procedures are in place, which fully meet the adoption national minimum standards and regulations. Recruitment arrangements for staff and members of the adoption panel are sound. This promotes the safety of children and young people.

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'.

The adoption service's decision-making process is equally rigorous and takes place in a timely manner. Adoption panels benefit from a committed membership with a broad experience of adoption and are well chaired. Clear recommendations are made to the agency decision maker who makes prompt decisions, taking the views of panel into consideration. The decision-making process includes a process for feeding back to the service on the quality of information produced and presented to panel. There are good quality assurance systems to monitor paperwork presented to panel. This ensures that reports are of a good standard and do not cause delays in decision making for children.

However, not all of the existing quality assurance systems robustly address all shortfalls in practice. For example, gaps in staff supervision records may impact on the management of staff performance and development if left undetected. There is no impact on outcomes for children.

The adoption service is well managed both strategically and operationally. The size of the team currently meets the demands of the service. Adoption workers receive good training in the specialist areas that they need and are well supported and managed. This supports and enhances the strong practice and focus on meeting children's needs through adoption.

Records held by the service in relation to adopted children and adults are good and records of key decisions are clearly retained on files. Records are securely maintained

to protect their confidentiality and appropriate administrative systems are in place. As a consequence records underpin, support and record the adoption work of the service effectively.

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 a written record is kept by the agency detailing the time and date and length of each supervision held for each member of staff, including the registered person. The record is signed by the supervisor and the member of staff at the end of the supervision (NMS 24.5)
- ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the agency to ensure compliance with the agency's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. (NMS 25.2)