

Sandwell MBC 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

The adoption service of the Metropolitan Borough Council of Sandwell is part of the local authority's Child Care Division, within Education and Children's Services. The adoption service is provided through the family placement service based at Crystal House in Smethwick. The adoption team, including the adoption support team is managed by the adoption team manager. There are seven social workers in the adoption team and one senior practitioner. The adoption support team has a senior practitioner, one full-time and one part-time social worker, a community support worker and a business support officer.

The work of the adoption service is to provide placements for Sandwell children in need of adoptive families. The team recruits, trains, assesses and supports approved adopters. It manages and supports a letterbox system for indirect post adoption contact, undertakes work with inter-country adoptions, section 55 counselling and family finding for children needing adoptive placements. Adoption support is assessed and links provided to local groups and direct work undertaken. Sandwell adoption service is part of the Black Country Consortium, which has formed Adoption in the Black Country (ABC). This consortium of the neighbouring authorities of Walsall, Wolverhampton and Dudley work closely together on adoption issues. They jointly fund a recruitment officer and share preparation training to prospective adopters in the consortium.

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 during which all the key standards were considered. The adoption agency provides a range of support to adoptive families, but their experience of support is variable and full use is not made of the Barnford Placement Support Service for children looked after by the local authority. However, there have been no disruptions within the last year so matches have been effective and placements maintained.

The service works well with birth families involving them in plans for their children and providing information in order to promote their heritage and sense of identity. They are committed to supporting birth parents and relatives in maintaining contact. This is sensitively and effectively implemented and is reviewed by the adoption service.

The agency recruits suitable adoptive families and prepares, assesses and approves them thoroughly so they can meet the needs of adoptive children. The adoption panel and decision making arrangements are robust. However, although the

employed staff are recruited appropriately and receive good support and training, the agency has not been thorough in ensuring that panel members and contracted services are suitably recruited. Although management arrangements have some strengths, this shortfall has had an impact on the judgement for staying safe and organisation, making their overall outcome judgement satisfactory.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last inspection was a random inspection and identified one action and two recommendations. The action related to the information available about each child being considered for adoption and this remains a recommendation. The recommendations also remain unmet as the children's guide does not include the Ofsted address and the child protection procedures are not inclusive of all situations where a child placed for adoption may be abused or neglected. These remain recommendations from this inspection.

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 adoption service is part of the Adoption in the Black Country (ABC) consortium and shares the resource of a marketing and recruitment officer. There are systems in place that allow the needs of Sandwell's children to be met through this arrangement and the joint working allows for effective use of limited resources. The consortium allows prospective applicants to contact a central point and be directed to the most appropriate authority, which is not always based on where they live. There is a need for more prospective adopters from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities, but use is made of external placements to address this need. The information sent out to those interested in adoption is well presented and clear apart from the information about when the application is taken, which is implicit rather than overt.

Those making direct contact with the service to enquire about adoption are able to speak to workers who are experienced and knowledgeable about the subject. An information evening is run with the ABC partners and takes place every two to three months. Most adopters find these meetings helpful, although there are comments about some early frustrations with delays. All prospective applicants are visited by two workers, which is good practice, who provide further information and identify if there are any issues, such as medicals that need to be addressed at an early stage. This information is written-up and a decision made by the manager about whether or not to invite an application. Prospective adopters are given sufficient time to complete their application before the preparation course.

The preparation courses are again run jointly with the ABC. Each authority provides approximately two courses per year and a course is available about six times a year. There are effective systems of communication between the course leaders and the assessing worker and each authority has a training coordinator who meets with their counterpart in the ABC to review the course and ensure consistency of content. Adopters comment positively about the course, one said 'it got us to really think about the issues' and another, 'it gave insight and understanding into what our child had been through'. Before the course ends Sandwell identify the assessing social worker for the prospective adopters, which allows smooth transition from training to assessment.

The assessment starts with a written agreement between the worker and the applicants, which includes the intended date for the adoption panel. The assessments are thorough, including statutory checks, CRB checks, a comprehensive health and safety check, a range of personal referees including previous partners and employers and some very effective use of competency evidence. The level of analysis within the reports is variable but the overall quality is satisfactory. Adopters commented that their assessing social worker 'was courteous and approachable' and another adopter that the assessment was undertaken with 'sensitivity'. It is good practice that all assessments have a mid-way review and a second option visit when the assessment is completed and before presentation to adoption panel.

The panel is supported by appropriate policies and procedures. It is well organised and meetings take place twice each month with the possibility of additional panels if there is an urgent need. The observed panel operated effectively and efficiently with a clear focus on the needs of the children. There is a helpful process of providing the attending social workers with an agenda for them to update the panel and forms for each panel member to give feedback on the quality of the reports they consider. The membership of the panel is not well managed as no checks had been obtained prior to the medical advisor starting work on the panel. Similarly not all panel members' files had all the details specified in schedules 3 and 4 of the regulations. The minutes of the panel are full and convey the discussion and recommendation of the panel, although some information is not accurate. The minutes do not record information about siblings separately, the strengths of the applicants but not the reasons for the recommendation are identified, the recommendation includes the advice about matching and the minutes are signed by the agency decision maker who has not attended the panel meeting. Decision making is well informed and timely.

After approval adopters are supported by their assessing social worker and receive a pack of information designed to keep them in the picture at this stage in the process. When a possible link is made with a child most adopters felt they had all the information available stating in the surveys; 'we had all the relevant information on the child' and another 'we had as much as was available'. Some adopters were not so confident about this. One adopter survey said the service could improve; 'by giving all the file information on the child at the start'. There are systems in place to ensure that children's needs are identified and linked with the skills of adopters. The adoption team have a referral meeting and collate information into a 'matching matrix' of the child's needs and adopter's abilities, which leads to an action plan for

the match. There have been no disruptions within the last year. The placement of children for adoption is well planned with detailed introductions that include a review before the child moves. Life appreciation days for the child are well established and convey vital information directly to the adopters. However, there are a number of examples of relinquished babies not being placed with their adoptive families until they were one or two years old and of vital information being shared with adopters at a late stage in the linking process.

There are effective systems in place to ensure that staff employed by the service are suitable to work with children. However, the authority is using a service which is not a registered adoption support agency to provide adoption support and has not undertaken the appropriate checks to employ staff under its own auspices. This action may leave children vulnerable.

There are safeguarding procedures in place but they are not inclusive of all situations in which a child placed for adoption may be neglected or abused. Similarly the procedure relating to historical abuse is not clearly linked to disclosures where the victim has been adopted.

While there are shortfalls within this outcome area they do not directly impact on the outcomes for children.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is satisfactory.

The family finding social workers write the adoption support plans in liaison with the child's social worker, which assists in the development of meaningful plans. The adoption service provides a range of support to adoptive families which enables them to provide stable and permanent homes for the children placed with them. Adopters appreciate the continuity of having the same support and assessing social worker. The post approval pack provides helpful information for adopters at a time when there is sometimes less activity for them. This is supported by a visit from their social worker who establishes what form of contact is preferred and how frequent. Members of the post adoption support team meet with approved adopters and are available through the duty system for support and can respond quickly to messages left. The system allows callers to speak directly to workers with adoption knowledge, which is relevant to the support for the children placed. They complete comprehensive adoption support assessments, which are reviewed if there is on-going work with a family. Adopters referred very positively to individuals in the post adoption support team. One adopter said the team 'was great...very supportive'. There were other adopters who said that they needed more support, one adopter's survey stated, 'we felt we needed to say if we don't have help we'll be in crisis'.

The post adoption team provide a range of support through newsletters, activities, training and buying into camps run by a local adoption support agency. Some of the training is provided jointly with the ABC consortium. This has included training adopters identified as useful such as 'a piece of cake' and 'theraplay'.

Adopters identified difficulties with the system for financial support. One adopter stated 'we're still waiting for adoption allowance, (child placed in December). We feel this is something the service could improve'; others saw the system as slow and inconsistent in its responses.

The Barnford service provides a wide range of local support. It has experienced, skilled staff who work directly with children and families. They undertake some sensitive work in preparing children for adoption and in undertaking life story work, including life story books. This service is not systematically available to adopters for advice, support and training as the focus of Barnford's work is looked after children and does not automatically extend to adopted children. There are examples of external resources, similar to those provided by Barnford, being brought in to provide the service adoptive families need. These services include the use of an unregistered provision to provide adoption support, as referred to in the previous outcome area.

Staff commented that advice and support is readily accessible from both the medical adviser and the legal adviser. The medical adviser meets with adopters if there are health issues for the child with whom they are matched, which provides helpful information.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The service recognises the life long implications adoption has on all those involved and works with birth family members in a sensitive, non-judgemental way.

There is evidence of some good work carried out with birth family members and useful information packs are provided to birth parents at an early stage of the process. These provide details about the adoption process and the support available to them which includes support from external agencies via a service level agreement. Birth family members are encouraged to give their views and feelings about the plan for adoption and where possible information about the family history and child's early life is obtained for the child. These views are recorded on some children's child permanence reports (CPR) but this is not consistent practice. Birth parents are supported in attending a meeting with adopters where appropriate and their views about their wishes for their child are heard. One birth parent survey stated; 'I was asked my views and they listened to what I said'. There are specific examples of children's cultural needs being well addressed in matching with adopters. Another birth parent commented that the service; 'help people to find good homes for children and they help birth parents as well'.

Direct work is carried out with children to prepare them for their adoption placement and for most of them information is gathered about their early life. Workers at Barnford do comprehensive work with some children to help them understand their life story and to develop life story books. Social workers also undertake this work and complete 'later in life' letters. These are seen as valuable tools in helping a child

understand their situation now and in the future. There are some good examples of life story books.

There is a well-managed and administered letterbox system in place with leaflets provided to participants explaining the system. Direct help in writing letters is provided wherever necessary to both adopters and birth parents. All exchanges are viewed by a social worker to ensure the suitability of the content, copies are made of all exchanges and reminders are sent prior to the date of the exchange. The letterbox exchange is reviewed from both the adopter's and the birth families perspective. Both adopters and birth parents commented positively about their contact with the post adoption workers. The service undertakes work with adults affected by adoption issues and offers a prompt and sensitive service.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The service has a current Statement of Purpose, which provides comprehensive information for anyone wishing to use the service. It has also developed its children's guide and has made the information more accessible to a diverse group of children. The guide is now child friendly and attractively presented, however it does not include Ofsted's contact details.

The agency provides clear written information for enquirers to enable them to know more about adoption and the range of Sandwell's children's needs. This is supplemented by regular information evenings, which offer enquirers the opportunity to meet with adoptive parents and social workers to find out more. These are run jointly with the ABC consortium and allow enquirers to be directed to the most appropriate consortium member.

All the managers in the service are appropriately knowledgeable, skilled and experienced; there are clear roles, responsibilities and accountabilities which are understood by all the staff. Staff are organised and managed effectively and are well supported through regular, planned and recorded supervision in addition to informal arrangements. Staff are enthusiastic about their work and work well together. One member of the adoption team commented; 'I've never worked with such a supportive team before'. Children's social workers are positive about the support and advice they receive from the adoption team, who are said to be approachable, knowledgeable and clear about their roles. The administrative support is limited due to the number of staff in this role, but social workers identify key staff who work hard to support them. Most adopters are positive about the service they receive. One adopter commented that they would come back to the service when they are ready

to adopt again and 'would recommend them to others'. Other adopters commented on staff being 'skilled, sensitive and professional'. Some adopters identified some delays and lack of consistency in the payment of allowances and that the service was 'at times chaotic'.

Staff have access to a good level of training, including external training of a high quality. All staff take part in mandatory refresher training in safeguarding. Some of the training is shared with the ABC authorities, allowing access to some specialist resources. Children's social workers have training in the completion of CPRs and life story work. Staff feel that Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council is a reasonable employer, although the current changes within the authority have led to a degree of apprehension and uncertainty. Staff in adoption work do feel 'we are forgotten at times'. The executive of the council do not receive regular written reports to ensure they are aware of the work of the service which enable them to monitor outcomes for children. The last report on the service was three years ago.

Records in relation to adopters are well structured, information is easy to access and they contain closure summaries where appropriate. The children's adoption files are variable in quality. Some CPRs do not contain all the relevant information, although the panel advisor does work to address this. Children's files inspected did not consistently contain all the relevant information. There is evidence of file audits and case decisions made in supervision on the files.

The files on staff contain all the required information and are compliant in the recruitment systems for new staff. The files on panel members however, lacked proof of identity and verification of references and one contained none of the required information as raised in a previous outcome area. There is a separate record of allegations and complaints, but the record of complaints does not include the details of the investigation.

The adoption team are based in an office which is accessible and convenient for anyone who wishes to visit. The premises are secure, with appropriate storage and security for records and IT systems.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Service provision addresses any particular needs in relation to disability, race, culture or gender. Good information is available on cultural and religious needs, access to information is addressed in an innovative manner through the use of audio tapes as well as translators to assist service users.

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):

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- ensure the child protection procedures are finalised making it clear they relate to any situation of possible abuse of children placed for adoption. These procedures must include guidance about allegations of historical abuse (breach of LAA Regs 2003) (NMS 32)
 - ensure that no panel member is allowed to begin work until any relevant CRB and all status checks have been satisfactorily completed and they have signed a confidentiality agreement (breach of LAA Regs 2003 11(3)(d) Schedules 3 and 4) (NMS 11.3)
 - ensure that the minutes of the panel meetings are accurate and informative, and clearly state the reasons for the conclusions reached, advice about matching considerations and separate consideration and minute for each child referred to it by the agency (breach of LAA Regs 2005 18(1) (NMS 12.3)
 - ensure that a written policy is in place and implemented which is intended to safeguard from abuse or neglect children placed for adoption by the authority and for dealing with allegations of historical abuse (breach of LAA Regs 2003) and (NMS 32.4)
 - ensure that anyone providing adoption support services comply with regulation 5 of the Adoption Support Service Regulations 2005, unless they are employed by the local authority for that purpose (breach of regulation 5 of the Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005)
 - ensure that the children's guide shall consist of a statement as to the matters listed in Schedule 2, with particular reference to the address and telephone number of Ofsted (breach of regulation 3(1) LAA Regs 2003) (NMS 1.4)
 - ensure the executive side of the council receive written reports on the management and outcomes of the service every six months (NMS 17.3)
 - ensure comprehensive and accurate case records are maintained for each child (NMS 25.1)
 - ensure that a written record is made of any complaint, including the details of the investigation made. (LA Adoption Service Regulations 2003) (NMS 27)