

Wolverhampton City Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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Inspector	Carole Moore / Christy Wannop
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Service information

Brief description of the service

Wolverhampton City Council's adoption service is based in Bilston. The service aims to provide adoptive families for those children and young people in Wolverhampton who need permanency through adoption. The adoption team recruits, assesses, prepares, trains and supports adoptive parents, including those wishing to adopt from abroad. It provides counselling for parents wishing to place their child for adoption and has a service level agreement with a registered voluntary adoption agency, to offer independent support for birth families whose children have adoption as a plan or who have been placed for adoption.

Post adoption support for adoptive families is provided by the team in conjunction with the voluntary agency. The team also undertake birth records counselling and intermediary services to adults affected by adoption and give information about other agencies who can assist if the piece of work is more complex.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

Good: a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

Adequate: a service that only meets minimum requirements

Inadequate: a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **good**.

This is a good and effective adoption agency, which has worked hard over the past 12 months to improve areas of practice and the timeliness of placements. Outcomes for children and young people are adequate and there is a proactive and systematic approach to matching and family finding. Good support systems result in stable and secure placements. Adopters, children's social workers and other stakeholders are wholly positive about the service.

There is effective collaboration with other agencies and support services which ensures children's needs, particularly in relation to their health, psychological well-being and education, are supported. There is a clear approach to safeguarding which promotes children's overall safety.

The agency is committed to adoption as a positive placement choice for all children, and has introduced robust tracking and monitoring systems to ensure this is always

considered. Wolverhampton is ambitious to offer equality of opportunity for all children; including older children, children with disabilities and large sibling groups.

Since the previous inspection and nationally published statistics, Wolverhampton has made progress in reducing the time that children wait for adoptive placements. This is being achieved, with a level of success, through introducing measures to track children through the system and by taking action when there is unnecessary delay for them.

Children are involved in their plans, and the sensitive approach of social workers ensures they always understand what is happening to them. However, there is currently no formalised approach to ensuring the wishes and feelings of children are recorded so as to develop the service. There is also a need to ensure children's permanency records are updated and that life story work and later life letters are produced in a timely way and contain the right information.

Leaders and managers are a stable, respected and imaginative group who learn from research have a realistic understanding of the strengths and the shortfalls of the service; they have a real determination to 'get it right.' Staff are skilled, experienced and show a real commitment to improving outcomes for children.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- ensure the wishes and feelings of children are taken into account by the adoption agency in monitoring and developing its service (NMS 1.6)
- ensure the life story and later life letter represents a realistic and honest account of the circumstances surrounding a child's adoption and that these are received by the prospective adopters within ten working days of the adoption ceremony (NMS 2)
- ensure children are placed within 12 months of the decision of the agency's decision maker that they should be placed for adoption (NMS13)
- ensure records are clear, accurate, up to date and contribute to an understanding of the child's life.(NMS 27)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **adequate**.

Children are prepared for their adoptive placements. There are a variety of social story books to enable them to understand their journey and direct work with children is impressive; their wishes and feelings are explored and adhered to if appropriate,

and they understand what is happening to them. Children get a DVD of their new family which really helps in their final preparation for placement. However, although wishes and feelings about their personal situation are captured, this is not evidenced and taken into account formally in monitoring and developing the service.

Children make good overall progress in all aspects of their development. Their needs are appropriately assessed prior to being matched with their adoptive families, and careful matching ensures that the adopters can meet those needs well. Any difficulties they experience with education and learning are appropriately addressed by the Looked After Children Education (LACE) team. There are a number of social story books to prepare children for a variety of transitions. These enable the child to fully understand any changes, which in turn provides the child with confidence which then increases their learning. Equally, health issues are managed well and adopters have prompt access to a variety of health resources. There is a weekly drop in clinic to support children and their adoptive families and they appreciate this.

Children settle well and have the best opportunities to develop positive attachments to their adoptive parents. One adopter said that the child had been really quiet but is now happy and confident and settling well. A children's social worker commented that the child 'is doing really well,' and about another:

'Fantastic settling; just seems to work.' When children settle well, their behaviour improves and they become socially more confident and able to form positive relationships with their peers. This also enables them to develop a positive sense of self and a clear understanding of their identity and heritage.

Children are not always placed within 12 months of the agency decision that they should be adopted. However, in most cases, this is due to court delays and other circumstances outside of the control of the agency. There has been a proactive approach by managers in that they have met with the court judges as well as Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) to discuss practice and highlight cases which feature delay. There are also delays in the care planning process which can cause initial delays in planning for permanence but these are also currently being addressed; there has been significant improvement since the last inspection in addressing delays for children. An example of improvement is that in the last seven months, the panel has recommended double the number of links (20) than in the whole previous year.

Children get opportunities to develop confidence and explore their adoptive identity at residential camps through a service level agreement with a voluntary agency. Here they spend time away from their families with other adopted children. Families say children are more likely to try new things after these camps; they have improved self-esteem and social interaction. This provides children with the skills to combat bullying, exclusion and isolation.

Quality of service

The quality of the service is **good**.

There is a thorough approach to preparing, assessing and approving prospective adopters which is effective in providing families who understand and can respond to the needs of adoptive children. Adopters are very positive about their contact with the agency, from their initial enquiry onwards, and feel that they are valued and welcomed. One adopter said: 'the whole adoption team were wonderful and we were supported the whole way through.' The preparation training is well received. Adopters said of the training that it, 'really made us think and put us at our ease.' Recent training for workers on assessment and analysis has helped them to focus their assessments; they provide a balanced analysis of risk and signs of safety and assessments are completed in a timely way.

The adoption panel is robust in its consideration of applications to adopt which supports safe and secure placements. Meetings are effectively administered so that panel members have a good opportunity to give all the papers full consideration. The diverse range of experiences of the panel members ensures there is an informed and balanced recommendation. The adoption panel receives regular information on the progress of children, adopters and timescales, and there are formal quality assurance mechanisms to give feedback to the workers; this enables them to improve their practice where necessary. The minutes are comprehensive and provide a good and accurate record of the discussion and reasons for the recommendation. This is not only important for the decision-making process but also for the child in the future. Every six months, the panel provides the executive board of the authority with a thoughtful and comprehensive analysis of the work carried out and identifies any shortfalls as well as areas of good practice.

Thorough, well documented decision making at all levels supports effective placements. The authority is abreast of developments in adoption practice and has reduced the potential for delay in processes by taking the decision about adoption placement straight to the Assistant Director.

The matching process is thorough and prospective adopters from a wide range of backgrounds are approved. Since the last inspection, a family finder is allocated at an early stage to prevent delay; this links to the adoption improvement plan. This enables the family finder to have time to gain a good knowledge of all of a child's needs, including those related to faith, gender, ability and ethnicity, to inform an appropriate match with adopters. It also provides the child's social worker with a link to the adoption team which counteracts any drift and helps to ensure Court directions and timescales are met.

Prospective adopters have a complete picture of the child to inform their decision making, and they meet with the medical adviser to discuss any medical implications. The quality of child permanence reports is improving, following training, and all are subject to intensive scrutiny by the adoption manager. This is welcomed by children's social workers. The reports are now more child focused, and contain the comments of birth parents and the child where possible. A child's social worker commented, 'It is crucial there is an accurate record of birth parents wherever possible and I make really sure I get something so that the child has information in later life.' Adopters and children's social workers were clear that a significant strength of the service is

introductions; they are well planned, well thought through, really well supported and fully take into account the needs of the child.

The adoption team responds promptly to requests for help both before and after adoption. There is a buddy scheme in place for adopters to share experiences and to provide support and this has been well received by all adopters. There is effective work with birth parents in a number of ways, which also has a significant positive impact on their adopted children. It enables the birth parents to understand what has happened to their children. It also helps them to establish effective contact arrangements with their children and contribute to their life journey work and the maintenance of their heritage. Birth parents are very appreciative of the support, and one commented: 'They did it all OK.' Another told the authority that they trusted that Wolverhampton had found the very best families for their children.

All services are tailored to meet individual needs and are thoughtfully and sensitively delivered by experienced and well-qualified staff. There is a service level agreement with a voluntary adoption agency to provide support to adopters and intermediary work with adopted adults. Feedback from service users is positive, with complimentary comments about the sensitivity of the worker.

While the importance of life story books and later life letters for children is valued by the authority, there has not always been sufficient time within children's teams to complete them. Work begun by them is often supplemented by the adoption team. Plans are in hand to provide new posts within the adoption team to address this shortfall. Adopters demonstrate a very open attitude to promoting their child's heritage through supporting contact; they also fully appreciate the value of helping children understand the information about their birth family to help them understand what has happened to them.

Safeguarding children and young people

The service is **good** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

The safety and well-being of children placed for adoption has a high priority in this service. Children are placed with adoptive families who are well prepared for the task of adoptive parenting and keeping them safe. Safeguarding, attachment and managing behaviour form a significant part of the preparation course and on-going training ensures adopters have a thorough knowledge of how to promote all aspects of safety. There are also clear guidelines on using social networking safely.

Recruitment practices are robust for all members of staff and those panel members on the central list. This ensures that only those people assessed as safe are able to work with children and service users.

Adopters are assessed with safeguarding in mind. In addition to undertaking all the necessary checks and references, the workers have had additional training on the use of adult attachment style interviews to assess the attachment style and close relationships of individual adopters and their use of social support. Consequently,

adopters demonstrate an excellent understanding of how a child's previous experience may affect their current behaviours. One adopter said: 'We were well prepared.' Thorough documentation about children when first placed gives adopters all the information they need to keep everybody safe. This enables them to put appropriate strategies in place to help deal with any situations.

Once children are in placement they are visited regularly by both their own social worker and the adoption social worker. Children know they can contact the social workers at the agency if they have any concerns they do not wish to share with their adoptive parents; there is clear information for them in the children's guide about this. This ensures that children have a variety of people to contact to share any worries.

The authority learns from safeguarding issues. They investigated thoroughly the one issue in the last twelve months and have held extensive discussions with all staff regarding the lessons to be learned from this. Reflective practice in supervision, team meetings and by managers ensures there is a strong safeguarding theme.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the local authority adoption agency are **good**.

The agency has a clear aim to provide secure and sustainable adoptive placements. They are ambitious and really want to achieve timely outcomes for children who require adoption but this still remains a challenge. There are rigorous monitoring systems in place to track all children who are looked after to ensure drift or delays in the care planning process are reduced. No child is automatically excluded from consideration for adoption. Children placed for adoption in the last year include sibling groups of older children, and children from minority ethnic backgrounds. Once a decision has been made that adoption is in the child's best interest, the majority of children are placed within the required timescales.

There are knowledgeable, enthusiastic, respected managers with a very good grasp of the day to day and organisational issues affecting the adoption service. However, delays in the care planning processes can cause initial delays in identifying a plan for adoption; these are currently being addressed.

Managers are certainly committed to external scrutiny. For example, the service has welcomed external scrutiny and peer review and has contributed to the Department for Education's review of their scorecards and volunteered for Ofsted themed survey visits. They are striving to pursue developments that can improve the quality of the service. The manager is a long-standing employee at Wolverhampton and has the confidence of the social workers, not least for her thorough attention to detail and her 'hands on' skill at all levels of the adoption process.

Wolverhampton commissions a shared system for recruitment of adopters, through a consortium approach with three other Black Country authorities. There is a clear and regularly reviewed recruitment strategy which offers a consistent service and choice

to enquirers and applicants. This rigorous approach maximises opportunities to reach a diverse range of potential adopters to meet the diverse needs of children waiting for an adoptive family.

A significant strength of the agency is the calibre of its staff at all levels. They are committed, enthusiastic, and hard working as well as being knowledgeable, experienced, skilled and appropriately qualified. Managers support them through regular supervision and access to good quality training to ensure they retain their competence and up-to-date knowledge of adoption issues. This ensures they deliver a child-focused service of a good quality overall. The authority invests in and learns from research; this is key to achieving good practice and improved outcomes for young people.

There are good links between the fieldwork teams and the adoption team to provide a child-focused and integrated service, dedicated to improving outcomes for children. The administrative support is good; staff care and take ownership of the work, knowing their part in the adoption process is vital for the smooth running and delivery of the service to children.

The service is well monitored at all levels. Development plans are already in hand to update and strengthen monitoring. Tracking meetings are now integral to the governance of the service by senior managers and this has had a clear impact on reducing delays. The executive is well informed through regular reporting.

There have been significant developments and improvements since the last inspection. All the recommendations from the previous inspection have been addressed and the local authority has put in place a variety of action plans to improve the overall service and thus improve outcomes for children.

Stakeholders, service users and children know what they can expect from the service as there are a number of clearly written pieces of information available and readily accessible. For example, the Statement of Purpose, and comprehensive information for enquirers are on the website. As well as a child-friendly children's guide, there are a number of individually tailored resources which are used to enable children to understand what Wolverhampton offers to them and how to access other services.

There are very effective relationships with partner agencies, for example, children and mental health services, health and education, all of whom work closely with the social work and adoption teams. This ensures that children achieve satisfactory outcomes as all the services work together in a coordinated way for the benefit of the child. One stakeholder commented; 'The placement of the children due to their age, early life histories and length of time looked after made the placement one with high risks. The high quality and professionalism of the staff and the service gave the best chance for success and this has been such a benefit for the carers and the children.'

Overall, records are very well ordered to enable ease of access to information and give a coherent picture of the child's life story, if they access their records in the

future. One child's permanence report had not been updated with valuable information about health which could have an impact when reading it in later life because of the omission. These are stored in very safe and secure facilities to prevent unauthorised access or damage.

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 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for local authority adoption agencies.