

Torbay Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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Setting address	Torbay Council, Town Hall, Castle Circus, TORQUAY, TQ1 3DR
Telephone number	01803207870
Email	adoption.team@torbay.gov.uk
Registered person	Torbay Council
Registered manager	Amanda Douglas
Responsible individual	John Skinner
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Service information

Brief description of the service

Torbay Council adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with adoption. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters. The service provides support to adoptive families before and after approval. The service also carries out birth records counselling and provides a service to adults affected by adoption.

The service works closely with children's social workers within the authority to make sure that children are matched with suitable adoptive families. Currently the agency places children with its own approved adopters and those approved by other agencies. The council commissions a service for those wishing to adopt from overseas from a voluntary adoption agency.

The agency approved six adoptive families in the year ending March 2012. It placed eight children for adoption in the same year. At the time of the inspection, there were 15 children currently waiting for an adoptive placement.

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 **adequate**.

Extensive recent progress has been made within the adoption service to reduce delay for children awaiting adoption. However, the overall service for looked after children still does not meet prescribed timescales in identifying children for whom adoption is in their best interests. This has influenced the overall judgement of adequate.

The Department for Education issued an improvement notice to the local authority in February 2011. The council established an improvement board and issued an action plan for adoption services. The plan includes the development of policies and procedures, remodelling and restructuring the service, improving information about adoption and developing the adoption panel. Work is underway to achieve the targets set out in this plan, although there is still some progress to be made in all

aspects of the service.

There have been changes to the management structure, new policy developments and a recent recruitment campaign for adoption social workers. These changes have resulted in improvements to services for adopted children and adults. Foundations are in place to build a more effective service, which was described as 'gaining momentum and energy'. However, improvements are not yet fully embedded in all areas of adoption practice, in order to improve outcomes for children.

Outcomes for children are closely measured and monitored. The specific attachment needs of adopted children are carefully considered by a range of childcare professionals. Children are matched well in their adoptive placements and make worthwhile relationships with their adoptive families.

Education and health needs are actively promoted and there is an effective support service for children after they have been placed in their adoptive families. This has led to more stable and secure adoptive placements. However, life story work and some later life letters have not been completed for every child.

Torbay Council's children's service views adoption as a positive placement choice for children. The authority has recently introduced monitoring systems to ensure that adoption is considered and to track the progress of any children who wait for an adoptive family. The service is effective at placing siblings together. The majority of children who have an adoption plan are now placed within prescribed timescales. This has been achieved while at the same time, carefully considering the specific cultural, emotional and physical needs and ages of children waiting to be placed.

Some very good practice was seen during this inspection. Adopters were generally positive regarding the quality of the service provided and most have been approved within eight months of receipt of their formal application. Skilled social workers and managers focus their work on meeting the needs of children who wait to be adopted. There is a detailed development plan and staff work hard to achieve the service's aims.

The panel is properly constituted. It has an experienced chair and is well managed. This helps to ensure that the service approves adopters within prescribed timescales.

Children are placed in stable and secure homes, which meet their assessed needs. As a result of this, children make progress in all areas of their development, including their ability to attach and form positive relationships with their adoptive families.

The child-focussed management and staff team work hard to ensure positive outcomes are achieved for children placed for adoption. Prospective adopters are carefully prepared and assessed. They receive regular and consistent support. The service also considers the needs of adopters' support network of friends and relatives. This helps to ensure that adopters are equipped to meet children's needs. There is also an effective service in place for adopted adults and those who have been affected by adoption.

A newly revised assessment, approval and decision-making process ensures that adopters are highly suitable and able to undertake their role as parents. Leaders and managers demonstrate a strong commitment to adoption through an almost constant re-evaluation of the service. Staff are diligent, appropriately qualified, skilled, knowledgeable and committed to delivering a quality service. They are supported with effective supervision and access to appropriate training. This ensures that adopters and children receive a high quality service from competent staff.

A number of shortfalls have been identified. For example, life story work and later-life letters are not always completed for every child in a timely manner. Members of the central list do not yet attend training each year and there is no formal mechanism in place to ensure that adopters agree to notify the agency in the event of their adopted child dying.

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 that the life story book is given to the child and prospective adopters in stages: at the latest by the second statutory review of the child's placement with the prospective adopters, and that the completed life story book at the latest within ten working days of the adoption ceremony (NMS 2.7)
- ensure that the social worker who knows the child writes the later life letter. In particular, make sure that the prospective adopters receive the letter within ten working days of the adoption ceremony (NMS 2.8)
- ensure that prospective adopters understand the importance for the birth family to be told if their child dies during childhood or soon afterwards, and agree to notify the adoption agency. The prospective adopters' decision and any subsequent action are recorded on their case record (NMS 12.9)
- ensure that each person on the central list is given the opportunity of attending an annual joint training day with the agency's adoption staff. (NMS 23.15)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

65 per cent of children who have an adoption plan are now placed within a year of an adoption decision being made. When children have not been placed within a year, extensive therapeutic work takes place to make sure children understand what is happening to them and that their views are obtained. An adoption social worker said 'although there have been delays for children in the past, we regularly see them now and provide them with as much support and information as we can.'

Children benefit from being placed with their siblings whenever possible. This makes sure that children stay together and maintain a shared sense of their identity.

Children placed with adopters generally make good progress in all aspects of their development. Their needs are assessed prior to being matched with their adoptive families and re-evaluated as part of post adoption support arrangements. Children generally settle well and are supported to develop positive and meaningful attachments to their adoptive parents. This helps to ensure that children benefit from placements in stable and safe adoptive families, which further contributes to their sense of security and stability.

Children's educational needs are supported well. This helps to promote good educational attainment.

Children being considered for adoption have their health needs carefully monitored and scrutinised. This ensures that children have access to appropriate healthcare services.

Children are safe living with their adoptive families. They benefit from appropriate checks which ensure that their homes provide a sound environment in which to live.

Quality of service

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

The quality of service provision is an emerging strength of this service. There has been a consolidated approach to preparing, assessing and approving prospective adopters. This is combined with the service making sure that adopters are provided with enough support and information to enable them to understand children's needs. As a consequence, adopters are positive about their contact with the adoption service. One adopter said 'Torbay (staff) were lovely; fast, efficient and caring'. Adopters also said that social workers were 'friendly, informative and welcoming' and they would recommend the service to others.

There is a re-formed and re-energised adoption panel, led by a recently-appointed and very experienced chairperson. Recommendations made by the panel follow developed policies and procedures. Panel members have a diverse range of life experiences and the panel's composition is appropriate, with a central list of members in accordance with regulations. However, there have not been any opportunities provided for panel members to take part in training. This means that they lack opportunities to enhance their skills and make sure that well informed recommendations are made. However, adopters say that 'panel runs well and asks the appropriate questions'.

Panel meeting minutes are thorough and detailed. They provide a concise record of discussions, timescales for applications and matches and reasons for recommendations. This is important for the service, but also for the child to see in

later life, so that the child can understand why decisions were made. Assessment reports of prospective adopters are of a high quality, in both their analysis and content. The panel administration is thorough. Regular panel monitoring and reporting has taken place, which has been part of the evaluation process of the adoption improvement action plan.

Decision making is well documented and occurs within prescribed timescales. Recommendations made to the agency decision maker, who is an appropriately qualified and experienced manager, are ratified in a prompt manner. This reduces the time that children wait for appropriate permanent placements.

The process of matching adopters with children is well organised and adopters say that this was thorough. The service has recently recruited adoptive parents from a wide range of backgrounds and life experiences, who are specifically able meet more complex needs. For example, some adopters are approved for sibling groups of children. A family finder is allocated to a child, in order to prevent delay and to ensure that the adoption plan is closely and promptly acted upon. Prospective adopters have as complete a profile of the child as possible, in order to help inform their decision making. Meetings with the medical adviser take place in order for prospective adopters to explore any relevant medical matters.

Child permanence reports are detailed and there has been a lot of input from the adoption service to ensure that they show sufficient information about the child's history and birth parents. This informs children about their history and helps to develop a sense of identity.

Children receive life story work from their social workers. There are several examples of very detailed and considered life story books and creative memory boxes. The service understands the importance of life story books and later life letters to allow children to obtain a clearer understanding of the reasons for their adoption. However, several of these books and letters have not been completed in a timely manner.

Following adoption, adopted children and their families have access to a range of child-focused education, health and therapeutic services. Adopters are kept well informed and they are actively involved in the support offered. Support is regularly evaluated to make sure that it is effective and that it provides positive outcomes for children.

Children and families receive educational support from the virtual head teacher, an advisory teacher and an information officer. There is a designated teacher forum for looked-after children in Torbay schools, where their educational progress is closely monitored. This ensures that adopters can access help from within the education service when required. The virtual head teacher also gains children and young people's views, to assist with service development.

Children's psychological and physical health is promoted by a range of medical support services. The medical advisor regularly attends the adoption panel as well as

carrying out the majority of looked-after child medical assessments. The advisor makes sure that any specific health needs of a child being placed for adoption are highlighted as early as possible in the adoption process. In order to further improve children's health outcomes, there is a designated nurse for looked-after children who works closely with the medical advisor, as well as liaising with a range of agencies and child care professionals. Adopters also receive strong and effective peer support and are actively encouraged to meet one another through support groups or informal meetings.

The agency provides access to birth records for adults who have been adopted. The waiting list for this service was relatively short. The adoption service does not offer a specific intermediary service for people wishing to contact family members, but this is not a statutory requirement.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Children are safe and feel safe. The local authority adoption service has developed a robust approach to safeguarding matters. Risk assessments are undertaken when necessary and any safeguarding incidents are appropriately followed up. The chair of the adoption panel says that safeguarding and child protection matters are a primary focus of the service. This ensures that children enjoy safe placements with their adoptive families. Health and safety checks make sure that all the family homes are appropriately safe for young children.

In order to make sure that only people assessed as safe are able to work with children and adult service users, the agency has procedures in place to employ new staff and members of the central list, which follow relevant safer recruitment guidance. The recruitment and vetting system of both staff and adopters is well organised, with all necessary checks and references in place. Service users can express any concerns through the use of an accessible complaints procedure.

Safeguarding issues are a core aspect of the preparation training for adopters. During specific sessions which form part of the preparation and assessment process, the service provides information to prospective adopters about signs and symptoms of abuse and neglect. There is a detailed programme of training in place, which happens both before and after approval. Adopters say training is helpful and well run. There is lots of further training related to safeguarding available to adopters, which ensures that they acquire an understanding of child protection, feel prepared to protect and support children and have an understanding of the potential long-term impact of any previous abuse or neglect. Training includes reference to recent research in brain development.

Since the last inspection, the adoption service has received one allegation in relation to a potential child protection concern. This was handled appropriately, promptly and sensitively. The service uses regional child protection procedures. Social workers who work for the service all have regularly updated mandatory safeguarding training.

Supervision is structures to provide regular opportunities to discuss safeguarding matters.

Adopters do not currently formally confirm that they will tell the agency if their adopted child dies in childhood or shortly after, so that the birth parents can be informed. A lack of any signed agreement means that birth parents may not be made aware of this significant information.

Children receive regular social work visits following their placement with prospective adopters. Children are aware that they can contact social workers if they have any anxieties and worries. There is information available for them in the children's guide about this, which can be translated into their home language or in other formats. This ensures that children can access a variety of people to share any concerns.

Leadership and management

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

The structure of the adoption service was changed in May 2012. Since this time, leaders of the local authority and managers have worked closely together to regularly evaluate and monitor the quality of the service. There is a commitment to improving standards in several aspects of adoption work. This is combined with closer scrutiny and performance monitoring. These actions have resulted in improvement in service delivery and significant progress in reducing delays for children who wait to be adopted. To continue to improve outcomes for adopted children, this progress need to be maintained over time, in all areas of adoption practice.

In order to address issues in the looked-after children's service which have led to delays in children being adopted, members of the adoption service have begun to meet colleagues in the looked-after children's team regularly to discuss children who are waiting to be adopted. Designated family finders are in place to assist children's social workers with the complex task of looking for a suitable match for a child. However, the challenge remains that there are several children waiting for the stability of a permanent placement.

Children's views are valued and acted upon with a wide range of methods used to gather their opinions. An action plan is in place which identifies areas for service development. This overview aims to ensure that adopters are being supported properly, as well as keeping young people safe.

The adoption service's premises are accessible. There are rooms are available for meetings, staff supervision and training. The service benefits from sharing the building with a variety of other services for children and families, which helps improve communication between different parts of the service.

The Statement of Purpose is written clearly and details the aims and objectives of

the service. A children's guide is accessible and inclusive for children of differing abilities. Prospective adopters can access a variety of information through the local authority's website. There are separate guides available relating to adoption and adoption support, designed for children, birth families and adult adoptees. These contain all the required information to enable people to make informed choices or obtain further advice when required.

Social work and administrative staff are well supported, regularly supervised and trained. There is an induction process for new staff to help them to acquire the necessary skills for the job. Social workers receive annual appraisals. The service's managers are professionally qualified and registered social work practitioners, with relevant experience in adoption. They also hold appropriate qualifications in management.

Eleven recommendations were made at the last Ofsted adoption inspection in November 2009. These covered a wide number of areas. As part of a rigorous redevelopment of the service, all the recommendations from the previous inspection have been addressed. This has resulted in a more effective service provided for adults affected by adoption together with improved and safer outcomes for children. For example, there is a recruitment strategy which has targeted diverse minority ethnic communities; children are placed with adopters with less delay and birth parents are offered support at an early stage in the adoption process. Requests for work with people affected by adoption are dealt with in a timely manner; there is a comprehensive recruitment and retention policy for staff and personnel files contain all the required, verified information. Historical adoption records are stored in safe and secure facilities, with a database for recording archived records.

Management of the adoption service and leaders of the local authority children's service have responded well to the areas for development raised at this inspection. Managers of the service are actively involved in maintaining the 'improvement agenda' of the service. They are aware of the shortfalls identified at this inspection. Managers and staff are highly committed to improve the quality of the service, as well as the outcomes for adopted children and adults affected by adoption.

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.