

Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council's adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters. The council has commissioned a similar service for inter-country adopters from a local voluntary adoption agency.

In addition, the service carries out the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters. It also provides support to adoptive families both before and after approval. The service also operates and maintains a letter box system, which supports the exchange of information in adoption placements. Birth records counselling, intermediary work, as well as an independent counselling and support service, is provided to birth parents, through commissioning arrangements with a voluntary adoption agency.

The agency approved 15 adoptive families and placed 19 children for adoption in the year preceding this inspection. At the time of the inspection, there were 18 children currently waiting for an adoptive placement. However, 14 of these children had been linked to adopters.

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**.

This is an adequate adoption service. However, good outcomes are achieved for adopted children, as demonstrated by the very low disruption rate, which is 1% in five years, which is significantly lower than the national average of 10%. Consequently, children are placed and remain in safe, secure and stable adoptive families. They also make good progress in all aspects of their development, including their ability to attach and form positive relationships with their adoptive family. Difficulties relating to timeliness in relation to the adoption process have been due to a variety of factors, such as the children's social care service's structure, which prevented a holistic approach to service delivery and a smooth transfer of work

between teams. There were also some shortfalls in effective care planning and decision making, which in turn has also led to some children drifting in the care system.

However, current leaders and managers have a clear and accurate picture of the strengths and shortfalls of their children's social care service and how these are going to be addressed. In the past six months, clear plans have been put into place to achieve this and some progress has been seen. For example, there have been some improvements in care planning and decision making, so children who require adoption are being identified earlier and more decisive decision making is taking place. Good systems have also been put in place to monitor and track a child's progress to prevent drift. The adoption manager is now made aware at an early stage of the children who may require an adoptive placement. This enables the service to plan recruitment, assessment and family finding more effectively and prevent delay. Concurrent planning has also recently been introduced, which drastically reduces the need for a child to experience placement moves and enables adoption plans to be achieved in a timely manner. The service is also fully aware of the need to revise its children's guides and develop an adoption charter.

At the time of the inspection, these changes had only recently been implemented; consequently, their effectiveness was not fully evident. However, the progress seen appears to indicate that improvements in the care planning and decision making processes are enabling children to be placed with their adoptive family in a timely manner. Children are placed with prospective adopters who are generally well assessed, prepared and trained. However, not all applicants' assessments are of a consistent evaluative quality. The service though has a proactive approach to safeguarding and this, combined with a good understanding and formalised approach to assessing risks, keeps children safe.

Child permanence reports do not always provide all the necessary information and are not of a consistent standard. However, the service, including the panel, works hard to try to address this. Children though are involved in their plans and social workers' child-focused approach ensures that they understand what is happening to them and are generally well prepared for adoption. Matching is carried out in a careful manner; however the documentation does not always fully evidence this. Additionally, records are not always clear, accurate, up-to-date and sometimes do not contribute to a child's life.

Good levels of support are provided to children and their adoptive families. This ensures children live in stable, well supported families whose needs are well met. Children's contact with their birth families is positively promoted wherever this is appropriate. Leaders and managers are committed to adoption. Staff are extremely hard working, qualified, skilled and knowledgeable in their work. They are supported by good communication, effective supervision and access to appropriate training. All are very aware of the strengths and limitations of the children's social care services, including the adoption service, and have a very positive approach to improvement and in driving the service forward.

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 life story book is given to the child and prospective adopters in stages: at the latest by the second review of the child's placement with the prospective adopters and the completed life story book at the latest within ten working days of the adoption ceremony (NMS 2.7)
- ensure the child permanence report includes all the information about the child and their family including the view of the birth parents and family about the adoption (The Adoption and children's Act 2002, Statutory Guidance 59 and the NMS 2.1)
- ensure the prospective adopters' report fully evaluates the information obtained from the prospective adopters and the adoption team manager checks that the prospective adopters' report covers all issues thoroughly (The Adoption and children's Act 2002, Statutory Guidance 42 and the NMS 10.11)
- ensure information is provided on the adoption agency's expectation of prospective adopters. Specifically with the development of the Adopters' Charter (NMS 10.3 (f))
- ensure the matching documentation clearly evidences the fact that the prospective adopter's report and the child permanence report are used to identify prospective adopter's who can meet the majority, if not all of the child's needs (NMS 13.4)
- continue to develop effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the agency (NMS 25.1)
- 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 young people are **good**.

The local authority is improving in its care planning, decision making and earlier placement of children in adoptive families. The co-location of the adoption team with the looked-after teams, has also assisted this process, resulting in much greater joint working. In very recent months, the local authority has increased the number of children adopted from from the looked after system. It has also reduced the time that children who have an adoption plan waitr until they are placed with adoptive families. Consequently, at the time of the inspection, only a small minority of children with an adoption plan had not been placed with adoptive families within the specified timescales. In situations where this had not been achieved, it is has been due to court delays or the complexity of a child's needs, which made it more difficult to find

families in the required timescale. Recently though, the authority has worked very effectively with the courts. This has resulted in a significant reduction in court delays during legal proceedings and enabled children to be placed with their adoptive families within the required timescales.

Children are well prepared for their adoptions. Their wishes and feelings are explored and adhered to, if possible and appropriate. They are encouraged to say what they would like regarding their new family, for example, to be with their siblings or to live with a family that has pets. However, when the child's expressed wishes are not in their best interests, this is explained to them; for example, if it is not appropriate to be with their siblings despite their wish to be placed together. Good preparation work is also carried out by the children's foster carers. For example, albums and audiobooks help children to recognise their adopters when they first meet. Foster carers keep memory boxes for children and these feed in to the process of developing their life story books. These books are usually of a very good standard, though are not always ready in time to help prepare children for their move or to help them understand their situation when they have moved into their new families. Moreover, a number of children who have been adopted do not have their life story books. The service is working hard to address this. However, those children that have their life story books have easy access to them, can look at them whenever they want and highly value them.

Children are gradually introduced to their adoptive family so that they feel comfortable when moving to their new home. This helps children to feel safe and secure with their new families and increases the chances that they will be able to form positive attachments with their adoptive family. One adopter spoken with said the introductions were, 'through and sensitive to the needs of their child.' They believed that this, together with the fact that the child had been well prepared for their new family, had resulted in the child settling well and developing extremely positive relationships with them. Adopters are also helped to understand the importance of contact and their role in the effective promotion and support of these contact arrangements. This enables children to maintain positive contact with their birth family and assists them in understanding their backgrounds, heritage and identity.

Children are usually placed with their siblings and sibling assessments are carried out. The agency is effective in placing siblings together where this is deemed best for the children. This facilitates positive sibling relationships and a shared sense of heritage. Children are given the best opportunities to develop positive attachments to their adoptive parents. In becoming more emotionally secure, their behaviour improves so they are more able to form positive relationships with adults and other children in school and in the community. This assists children to make good developmental progress, for example, in their health, educational attainment, behaviour and social skills.

Children's health needs are well met through the prompt provision of very good health resources, including those relating to health and psychological assessments. Similarly, children's educational needs are well met. For example, educational co-

ordinators ensure the educational progress of children is carefully monitored and any areas of difficulty quickly addressed. They also ensure children and young people enjoy a smooth school transition, if they require a new school in moving to their adoptive family. The head of the virtual school's specialist knowledge also ensures a holistic view of the child and appropriate training is provided to foster carers, adopters and designated teachers. This training enables those involved with the child to understand and manage the child's behaviour better. It also helps teaching staff to provide children with individualised and effective support to improve their educational attainments.

Children's behaviour improves because of living with their adoptive parents and through the support and advice the service provides to their families. This enables children to use community resources more successfully, as well as to form more positive relationships both within, and outside the family. For example, children access a variety of leisure activities such as swimming, dancing, singing, playing football and being in the Brownies and Scouts. This ensures that they integrate into the community and they develop confidence, self-esteem and aspirations for their future. Children also have opportunities to meet with other adopted children through a variety of social events arranged by the adoption service. This enables children to make friends with other adopted children and to develop a very positive view of their adoptive status. This is very clearly illustrated by children's comment that they like being adopted, as 'It's normal'. Adopters are also positive about these events, as it provides them with a further opportunity to meet other adopters and develop an informal support network.

Quality of service

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

The local authority receives a large number of adoption enquiries. Enquirers receive good quality information regarding adoption. Regular information evenings are also held where they can learn more about adoption. High quality information is provided and includes presentations from adopters. This enables those interested in adopting making an informed decision about whether they wish to pursue their interest in adoption. Invitations to submit an application are based on their possible suitability and the adoption service's knowledge of the current and future needs of children requiring an adoptive family.

The adoption service has good arrangements to prepare, assess and approve prospective adopters for its children. Prospective adopters have good preparation for their role as adoptive parents; this gives them a good understanding of the previous experiences and difficulties their child may present and the likely challenges that they may face as an adoptive parent. It also helps them to understand and support their child to make good developmental progress. Adopters also confirmed this, as they were very positive about the preparation training. One adopter said, 'we would certainly recommend Sefton to others.' Other adopters said, 'We thought the preparation group was very good, as it was so informative.' Another stated, 'It really made you think.' An overwhelming majority of adopters reported it was good to hear

from an adopter who told them what adoption was really like.

Assessments and the subsequent reports are generally well written and of good quality. A very large majority of reports are thorough, evaluative and consider attitudes, competence to adopt, as well as suitability to care for children. However, not all assessments are of this standard, for example, in one assessment there was a thorough exploration of the adopters' background, how it had impacted on them and their needs but it was not very evaluative in terms of how this impacted on their skills as adopters. A very large majority of adopters are approved within eight months of application and more recently some have been approved within six months. Those who are not approved within the timescales have specific justifiable reasons for the delay. The agency is able to use a number of independent social workers to complete assessments to prevent delay.

The adoption service has undertaken considerable work to improve the quality of children's written assessments. However, despite the provision of staff training and quality assurance of reports, the child permanence reports continue to be of variable quality. For example, one report had not been updated, nor was it written in an appropriate style. In one report there was no information regarding the birth father. In another one, despite the fact there was considerable information within the authority's records, there was very limited information regarding the birth mother. This means that full, up-to-date information, written in an appropriately accessible manner, is not always available for children accessing their records in later life.

The adoption service works hard to try to address any gaps in the information about a child, for example, a child's family history and life experiences. Adopters are also able to meet with other professionals, such as the adoption panel's medical adviser to discuss any specific medical needs of the child whom they may be considering adopting. This ensures prospective adopters receive as much information as possible about the child and enables them to make an informed judgement about whether they can meet a child's needs and provide a home for them. There is a good quality matching process in place which ensures that adopters can meet a child's identified needs well. However, the matching documentation does not always detail how the qualities and skills of the adopters will meet the child's identified needs. This means children reading this documentation in future may not understand why they were placed with their adoptive family.

The adoption panel is robust in its consideration of applications to adopt and address shortfalls in documentation presented to them. This further supports safe and secure placements. Panel members contribute differing experiences, both personal and professional; this ensures a full and balanced discussion of differing views takes place. Feedback on the quality of reports at each panel meeting is provided, along with information regarding the timeliness of assessments and the reason for any delay recorded. The adoption panel provides a rigorous analysis of the work of the agency and this has led to significant improvements in practice. The decision-making process is robust, well considered and timely. This ensures only appropriate adoptive parents are approved.

Staff are extremely committed and work hard to provide a quality service to meet the needs of adoptive families. A variety of support is available, ranging from informal practical support by placement support workers, to more complex work by the authority's Families and Schools Together (FAST) team, which is highly regarded by adopters. There is also a range of support groups and social events. Attendance at these groups and events helps to ensure that families continue to be supported both formally and informally. They also provide an opportunity for friendships to develop between the adults and the children. This provides a good opportunity for supportive relationships to develop between people who are in similar situations.

The service has also commissioned a voluntary adoption agency to provide a structured parenting programme, which is based on well known, accredited child and family therapy techniques. This programme is designed to educate parents about attachment difficulties and to help them gain a greater understanding of themselves, their child and to improve the relationships between them. In situations where there is a need for therapeutic support, this is provided by the child and adolescent mental health service, or purchased from an external agency, if this is more appropriate. This ensures adoptive families receive the therapeutic input that they require and helps the adoptive family to remain together. A programme of annual training for adopters has recently been devised and is to commence in April. The authority hopes this training will deal with such issues as attachment and trauma and enable adopters to understand the impact of this on the development, well-being and behaviour of their child.

The adoption service works hard to seek information from birth parents to gain their views and reflect these in planning documentation and children's information. Children's life story books contain information about birth families and the service works positively to encourage contact between adopted children and their birth parents where this is appropriate. There is a letterbox system in place for maintaining contact between adopted children and their birth families. The authority gives support to birth parents, birth relatives and adopters to write letters, if requested. This system is well organised and managed and effectively promotes contact between all parties. The authority commissions independent support and counselling for birth parents and their relatives from a voluntary adoption agency that also provides birth records counselling and intermediary work. These services are of good quality and sensitively delivered. This contract is well managed and monitored to ensure it meets people's needs and is delivered promptly.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

The preparation training ensures prospective adopters understand how children's previous experiences, including abusive ones, affect their behaviour. This work is extremely important as it increases their understanding of the individual needs of any child placed with them. It also ensures that adopters have a good understanding of the long-term impact of any previous abuse that their child has experienced and the specific safeguarding issues that may be applicable to their child. The agency also

ensures through their support packages that the adopters are able to manage this effectively.

Assessments of adopters are generally thorough and this ensures their suitability and ability to care for children. Adopters and children receive support and advice on safety matters. For example, adopters are supported to adopt safe caring practices, and where necessary, risk assessments are put in place to protect children. Work is also undertaken with members of adopters' support networks to help them understand adoption and increase their ability to support the adoptive placement. There is training on the use of the internet and the dangers that can arise from social networking and other social media. The service also works effectively with other professionals, for example, schools, which promotes children's safety.

Children have various written information, which is produced in a child-friendly format and gives them details of a variety of people they can talk to if they have any worries or concerns. They receive regular visits from their own social worker and the adoption social worker, who, although there to support the adoptive parents, also has a clear focus on the child's welfare and safety. This ensures there are adults who are accessible and to whom they can talk.

Staff are proactive in addressing potential safeguarding issues at an early stage. They recognise and address any concerns which may develop into a more serious issue by providing support, and they work closely with the child's social worker. Staff receive regular up-dated safeguarding training. Safeguarding is very much at the forefront of their practice and they discuss any issues of concern in supervision. Staff practice is also developed through discussions in team meetings. This emphasis and commitment to safeguarding ensures staff are up to date with current issues and know how to respond if there are concerns or allegations. Since the last inspection, there have been no safeguarding matters.

Leadership and management

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

A strategic review of social care aimed at minimising the changes of social workers for a child has taken place. This has resulted in firm plans to re-structure the child care services. The authority anticipates that this, together with training and mentoring of staff, will result in improved initial and core assessments, including children's written assessments. A shared value system has been developed to underpin the organisational change to enable a consistent and clear approach to working with children and families across the workforce developing. A new quality assurance framework has been introduced to drive forwards improvements in the service.

Leaders and managers demonstrate a commitment to adoption and are working hard to ensure that it is always appropriately considered as one of a range of options for permanency. A comprehensive adoption training programme has been developed for

all social care staff, which will target all areas of the child's journey through adoption. A tracking system, in the form of permanency planning meetings, has been developed, which tracks a child's journey through the adoption process. Adoption staff have been co-located with the looked after children's staff. This has resulted in improved communication and increased joint working with the aim of more timely and effective realisation of a child's care plan. The adoption recruitment strategy has also been revised and the website redesigned with a view to increasing its adopters. Work is also taking place to recruit a more diverse group of adopters for children. There are signs of progress, for example, children are being identified at an earlier stage for adoption and good decision-making is ensuring that children are being placed in a more timely way. However, all the planned changes have not yet taken place and those that have, are not fully embedded in the structure. It is not therefore possible to fully evaluate their effectiveness.

The recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters, together with a good matching process ensure children benefit from a stable home. This is clearly reflected in the service's low disruption rates, which are below the national average. The service enjoys effective relationships with its partner agencies, including voluntary adoption agencies and other local authorities in the adoption consortium. These effective working relationships benefit children waiting for adoption, as it results in an adoptive placement being found for them. It also ensures that should families experience any difficulties, effective support can be quickly provided. The Statement of Purpose gives comprehensive and clear information to anyone using the service so they know what to expect. The service is currently revising its children's guide, so that it contains all the information required. Currently, it does not provide information on how a child can raise a concern with an Ofsted inspector. Both the Statement of Purpose and the children's guides can be translated into other languages and formats, on request, to improve accessibility of information.

There are a number of quality assurance processes to improve outcomes for children. For example, leaders and managers monitor and carefully scrutinise the adoption service's performance and produce reports to inform the corporate parenting board. This ensures the council members are fully aware of how Sefton is performing in relation to adoption. The reports indicate an honest and accurate picture of the strengths and shortfalls and how these are to be addressed. Four recommendations were made at the last inspection of this service. Two have been addressed, however, two remain unmet. One relates to improving the child permanence reports so that they are of a consistently good standard. The second relates to life story books being produced in a timely manner. These recommendations have been raised again in this inspection.

Systems are in place for the on-going auditing and monitoring of the service's records. However, these are not sufficiently robust, as not all records are up-to-date, accurate or always contribute to an understanding of the child's life. For example, in one file there was a lack of clear information regarding the death of a child's parent. In another file, the matching documentation was very limited. In several child permanence reports there were errors. For example, in one case two different forenames were given a child, and in another there were variable spellings of a

child's forename. In one report, there was no information about the birth father and in another there was very limited information about the birth mother. The panel had subsequently identified these matters and they were addressed. The lack of a robust quality assurance processes prevented these issues being addressed earlier.

The service has firm plans in place to develop its feedback processes so that the views of adopters, their children and stakeholders can be more effectively obtained and information used to inform future planning, development and delivery of the service. At the time of the inspection, the agency did not have an adopters' charter in place; however, work is taking place to address this. The premises are accessible and secure. They are appropriate for the purpose and have rooms available for meetings, training, and staff supervision. Records are stored with appropriate security and accessibility, both electronically and in hard copy. There is a business continuity plan, which addresses the safeguarding and back-up of records, as well as the provision of alternative premises. This ensures that in the event of a crisis, disruption to the service is minimised.

The service is managed by skilled, experienced and well-qualified managers who show a strong commitment to improvement. Adoption staff are also suitably qualified, skilled and the majority very experienced in this work. Both the managers and staff are committed to improving the service so that it is of good quality and ensures children achieve good outcomes in their lives. Social workers are positive about the support they receive, which includes good quality supervision and training opportunities. Staff place a real emphasis on their professional development and use team meetings as a forum to discuss and develop their practice. This ensures the competency of staff and enables them to provide a good quality, safe and effective service. Good administrative support is in place and workers are knowledgeable, professional and efficient. This enhances the effectiveness of the adoption service.

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 the inspection of local authority adoption agencies.