

Halton Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This local authority adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with adoption legislation and regulations. These duties include: placing children who have a care plan of adoption with suitable adoptive families; and the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters. The council also commissions a service for inter-country adopters from a local voluntary adoption agency.

In addition, the service provides post adoption support to those affected by adoption, including birth records counselling and intermediary work. The service also operates and maintains a letter box system, which supports the exchange of information in adoption placements. An independent counselling and support service is provided to birth parents through commissioning arrangements with a voluntary adoption agency.

As at 31 March 2013, the agency had 7 approved adoptive families, with an additional 8 families in the process of assessment. They were family finding for 7 children, with 7 children being made the subject of an adoption order in the preceding twelve months.

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**.

The adoption service provided by the authority is adequate but with a number of very good features of service delivery. The authority is good at considering adoption for children at an early stage. This ensures that children are placed for adoption at a young age, which increases their opportunities for placement and for a successful outcome. Family finding processes are good and subject to regular review. The majority of children are placed for adoption in a timely manner.

The recruitment and preparation of adopters is targeted and thorough. The process

of assessment and approval is robust. Adopters speak very highly of the service they receive. Careful matching results in successful placements for children, with families that the agency are confident will be able to meet their long-term needs. The very low disruption rate is reflective of this skilled matching.

The main area of weakness is in the agency's quality assurance processes. These are not robust or challenging. Although children move through the adoption process in a timely way, this has resulted in only cursory consideration being given to some birth family members as potential carers, on occasion. This should have been identified by high quality and challenging supervision; and then through the agency's decision making processes.

Children's case records and the child's permanence report are of variable quality. They do not always contribute to a good understanding of the child's life. Records are on occasions contradictory, contain errors in details and decision making is not always explicit. Additionally, children's views are not always evident in relation to their care plan, nor are they utilised in relation to the development of the service.

Leaders and managers are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the service and they are taking effective steps to address concerns. They are aware of the changing nature of adoption and have embraced collaborative working as a means of improving service delivery.

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 adoption agency obtain, so far as is reasonably practicable, the information about the child's family which is specified in Part 3 of Schedule 1; specifically the information relating to their brothers and sisters (The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, Reg 16(1))
- ensure that the adoption agency obtain, so far as is reasonably practicable, the information about the health of each of the child's natural parents and his brothers and sisters(of the full or half-blood) which is specified in Part 4 of Schedule 1; specifically information relating to the child's brothers and sisters (The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, Reg 16(2))
- ensure that no child is assumed unable to communicate their views; specifically in relation to their care plan (NMS 1.3)
- ensure that the wishes, feelings and views of children are taken into account by the adoption agency in monitoring and developing its service (NMS 1.6)
- ensure that staff are supported and guided to fulfil their roles and provide a high quality service to children and service users; specifically that supervision provides

opportunity for challenge and reflection (NMS 24)

- ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the agency to ensure compliance with the agency's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring (NMS 25.2)
- ensure that records are clear, accurate, up to date and contribute to an understanding of the child's life (NMS 27)
- ensure that any contact plans between adopted children and their birth families are kept under review, as contact needs may change over time. (Adoption Statutory Guidance, Chapter 7, paragraph 2)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **good**.

Children who are placed for adoption by this agency experience good outcomes. Children are appropriately prepared for their move to adoption, dependant on their age and level of understanding. Those involved in this preparation are suitably trained and a programme of 'moving on' training is in place for foster carers. This ensures that foster carers are aware of the importance of keeping particular mementos and recording significant events for the child, so there is a clear record for the child's future. However, children's wishes and feelings regarding their care plan for adoption are not consistently gathered or recorded. In some instances children who are verbal, are still deemed to be too young to be able to indicate their views. Furthermore, when children's views have been ascertained later in the planning process they have not been included in the child's permanence report.

Introductions of children to their adoptive placements are sensitively handled and based on the needs of the child. Adoptive families contribute to this by preparing a 'family book' about themselves and their family, which is shared with a child prior to introductions beginning. This also helps prepare other children in the foster family for the child's imminent move. These measures ensure that the child's transition to adoption runs smoothly and the placement has the greatest chance of success.

The very large majority of children with an adoption plan are placed within 12 months of the adoption plan being agreed. The occasions when these timescales have not been met are primarily due to the complex needs of the child or unforeseen legal delays. Generally, the agency takes swift action to identify suitable adoptive placements.

Children are placed alongside their siblings when this is assessed to be the most appropriate plan. Subsequent children born to the birth family are also given the opportunity to grow up alongside their siblings, if this is appropriate for all concerned. Robust matching processes also ensure that children are placed with families with the skills and attributes required to meet their identified needs. Children benefit from stable and secure placements. The agency's disruption rate is

particularly low, having had no disruptions for over two years.

Children make good progress across all areas of their development. Appropriate liaison takes place with other professionals such as; speech and language therapists; psychologists; and the virtual school. This ensures that children receive the support they require to meet their individual needs.

Quality of service

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

Individuals accessing the service are largely positive about the service that they receive from the adoption agency. Indeed, adoptive applicants report that they had researched local adoption agencies and specifically chose to pursue their application with Halton. The council's website provides a good source of useful information for those interested in adopting or indeed those wishing to access support post adoption. Adopters report that they receive a speedy and professional response from the agency when they make further enquiries. Good quality written information is forwarded to potential applicants and this is followed up by a home visit by an experienced adoption social worker. Applicants are then invited to attend preparation groups. These are held regularly as the agency share the hosting of these with their partner local authorities. This ensures that applications are processed promptly and potential adopters are not left waiting unnecessarily.

Adoptive parents report that preparation and training is effective. The needs of the children awaiting placement are made clear; this includes an understanding of attachment theory; and the importance of carefully managing the child's move to adoption. There is also an opportunity to meet with experienced adopters and foster carers. Adopters report that a good range of practical exercises and discussions aid their learning. One adopter commented, "I thought the training gave an accurate insight into both the needs of the children and possible challenges which could be experienced."

Assessments proceed in a timely manner following preparation groups and the majority are completed within 8 months of the application to adopt. Assessments are thorough, including an assessment of the applicants' attachment style which aids the matching process. Applicants with limited child care knowledge are also encouraged to gain experience with children by helping at local nurseries. This helps adopters gain an understanding of child development. Adopters report positive relationships with their assessing social workers, particularly commenting on their skills of observation and reflection. Reports produced are of a good quality.

The quality of child permanence reports is variable. While some reports are thorough, containing all the information required about the child's birth family history and potential long term needs; others viewed had a number of significant omissions. Genograms were not always evident, even when this would have aided the understanding of complex family dynamics. In one instance older adult siblings had

not been contacted by the organisation, possibly denying the child the opportunity to be cared for within their family of origin. Descriptions and updated information on developmental progress was also missing in relation to older adopted siblings; despite some of this information being readily accessible within the organisation's own records. Other less significant errors included, referring to a birth parent by the wrong gender and inconsistencies regarding an individual's actual relationship to the child. In some instances this record of the organisation's involvement and child's family history is poor.

The adoption panel is appropriately constituted and well managed by an experienced panel chair. Panel members are safely recruited and provided with training and support. The chair contributes to the six monthly quality assurance report prepared by the service. Panel exercise appropriate scrutiny and the reasons for their recommendations are clearly recorded in the minutes of the meeting. Good systems have been implemented for the agreement of the minutes of the panel meeting. The agency decision is made following receipt of the final agreed set of minutes and in a timely manner. Relevant individuals are also informed of the decision without delay.

Similarly, the organisation has established a good process when an agency decision is required to confirm the care plan of adoption for a child. The agency decision maker ensures that she has the opportunity to consult with other professionals involved with the child and will defer making a decision if it is felt that additional information is required or if additional tasks need to be completed. However, in these situations the child's record does not always indicate an update to the information that has been requested. Children's records generally were of poor quality. It was not always clear when children had been seen alone when visited by their social worker and third party information was evident on one record. The agency is still in the process of introducing electronic record systems and currently a dual paper and electronic system is in operation. Staff were unsure where to locate records as a result.

Family finding is prioritised in the organisation. The adoption manager is aware at an early stage of the children with a potential plan of adoption and is able to track their progress. An understanding of the child's particular needs is also developed. This may relate to their developmental needs, or to their religion or ethnicity. Good quality life-story books are prepared for children in a timely fashion and those completing this work have received training. Many children are placed with adoptive families approved by the agency itself but the agency will source inter-agency placements if there are no suitable families available. The agency produce good quality profiles on children; as well as recording DVD footage of the child at play. These help ensure that adopters have a complete picture of the child prior to matching.

Matching processes are thorough. Detailed records are maintained of the information shared with adopters. Life-appreciation days are held for the majority of children. These enable the prospective adopters to meet with those individuals that have been involved with the child and share personal memories about them. Adoptive families who report that these meetings are, 'really valuable', appreciate this good practice.

Adoption support plans are completed, which identify the support needs of the child and the family and outline how the agency plans to meet these. These practices ensure that adopters are provided with full information by the agency, and satisfy the agency that the adopters have the skills required to meet the needs of the child. The particularly low disruption rate is indicative of the effectiveness of this practice.

In relation to post adoption support, the agency has a service level agreement with a registered adoption support agency and provides some of these services itself. Those in receipt of adoption support value the service. One individual accessing the service commented, 'The service I am receiving at present is excellent and the allocated post adoption support worker I have has made an enormous difference.' Support to birth parents is also provided by this independent service. Individuals are able to self-refer, with details of the service available on the organisations website, as well as in leaflet format. Commissioners are involved in monitoring the effectiveness of this service to ensure quality and value for money.

The organisation operates a letterbox system for the exchange of information between adopted children and their birth families. Clear contact agreements are in place for all parties to the arrangements. Sound administration systems are in place, and additional safeguards have been introduced following an information breach. The adoption support social worker oversees this system. Reviews of these arrangements are undertaken on a bi-annual basis. However, these are not extensive and do not involve consultation with all parties to satisfy the agency that they continue to effectively meet the needs of the adopted child.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

The agency ensure the safety of children in their adoptive placements, as regular visits are undertaken following placement, up to the time that the adoption order is made. Both the social worker for the family and the social worker for the child undertake visits. This ensures that any difficulties evident for either the child or the adopters can be picked up quickly by those professionals who know them and before the stability of the placement is threatened.

The recruitment of staff and prospective adopters is thorough, as suitable checks are completed to ensure their suitability. Staff in the adoption service are aware of safeguarding policies and procedures and attend regular update training. Safeguards are in place to ensure the safety of those providing independent support to birth parents and intermediary services. Staff are aware of the role of the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO), but there have been no allegations.

The thorough assessment of adoptive families ensures that only those that demonstrate the necessary skills proceed to approval. Preparation and assessment has a clear focus on attachment, as well as abuse and neglect. Adopters are helped to appreciate the impact that these experiences may have on the child and their

behaviour throughout their childhood. Where attachment issues have become apparent some years after placement, the agency has accessed specialised training for the adopters. This has; enabled them to understand what is happening; provided them with the tools to use to help address the problem; stabilised the home situation; and improved outcomes for the child.

The agency ensures that adoptive families are kept up-to-date with current trends and provides adopters with relevant information on issues such as internet safety and the risks associated with social networking. Robust health and safety assessments are also completed on the adopters' home environment. The quality of these assessments has improved since the last inspection.

Although, we were unable to speak with any children or young people as part of this inspection process, indicators are that young people are secure and settled in their families. There have been no safeguarding incidents relating to children placed for adoption.

Leadership and management

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

The organisation has effective care planning processes in place. Children who may ultimately require an adoption placement are identified in a timely manner. The proportion of children placed for adoption is higher than the authority's comparators, at 6%. Good tracking systems ensure that children do not experience unnecessary delay.

The recruitment of prospective adoptive families is effective and there is a suitable recruitment strategy in place. Priority is given to applications from families that live outside of the Halton area. This means that the agency is then able to place their children with families that they have assessed and approved themselves. This has resulted in very prompt matching for some children and families, as social workers have been able to consider matching needs while in the final stages of their assessment process. Families that do not receive priority are informed of the likely delay at the onset or are signposted to neighbouring authorities who have the capacity to begin the process immediately.

Family finding for children with an adoption plan is rigorous. The adoption team social worker works alongside the child's social worker to consider potential families. The agency hold a formal family finding review meeting at regular intervals to ensure that appropriate steps are being taken to identify a family.

The agency has established effective relationships with partner organisations. It works in close liaison with 2 neighbouring authorities and is a member of the North West regional collaboration of adoption agencies. By working in this collaborative way the agency is able to make best use of its resources. This has enabled the

sharing of good practice and the establishment of policies on a regional basis. Locally, the agency has been able to share the development of recruitment materials, as well as preparation and support groups for adopters.

The Statement of Purpose is comprehensive and provides helpful information about the service. It is subject to regular review and is accessible on the authority's website. Similarly, the children's guide to adoption is helpful, providing all the required information. This is attractively presented and is available in two formats, to meet the needs of children.

The agency has a number of quality assurance systems. However, these are sometimes ineffective. For example, they had not identified concerns relating to the limited exploration of extended family members. Similarly, some children's records were found to be out of date and they did not always provide a clear picture of the child's life and the reasons for decision making. These concerns, which were evident at the time of the last inspection, have not been satisfactorily addressed. The authority has however, recently entered into a shared auditing arrangement with its partner authorities with the intention of addressing this.

Social workers are experienced, skilled and knowledgeable about adoption. They feel well supported by a competent and experienced adoption team manager. Social workers also express confidence in senior managers being available to them and feel that their views are listened to. Staff value the training opportunities available to them and feel that these are appropriately targeted to adoption. For example, training on concurrent planning and the implications of foetal alcohol syndrome.

Social workers in the adoption team receive regular supervision and appraisal to support them in their work, but this is less consistent for children's social workers. While the frequency of supervision is good the records do not indicate that reflection and challenge is a feature of this discussion. It is mainly task based. However, when tasks are identified it is not evident in the records that these issues have been followed up at the next supervision. Individual case supervision was not evident on some children's cases for a number of months, despite it being a transitional period for the child. Management decisions were not clearly recorded on the child's case record.

Leaders and managers display a commitment to improving the quality of the service. While the agency does seek feedback from service users about the quality of some of their services this does not include the wishes and feelings of children and young people. Ofsted received no survey returns from children; were unable to meet with children as part of the inspection; and the agency has no established venue for adopted children to meet for support or consultation.

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.