

Wokingham Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

Wokingham Borough Council provides a comprehensive adoption service through its adoption team, based in Wokingham. The team undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include: the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of prospective adopters; the matching, introduction and placement of children with prospective adopters; the support of adoption placements; post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, including birth records counselling and intermediary work; and support to birth parents of children placed for adoption or who have been adopted. It operates as part of a local consortium with five other neighbouring unitary local authorities, who each contribute funding to provide the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service. (BAAS) This joint arrangement provides a range of resources for all the six members including: the operation and administration of the adoption panel; the letterbox system; the management of closed records; specialist advice and training; and independent support to birth families. The council have a contract with Parents and Children Together, a registered voluntary adoption agency, to provide a service for the preparation and assessment of people who wish to adopt from overseas.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

This was an announced key inspection which looked at the national minimum standards for adoption agencies and associated regulations. The agency places children with people who are most likely to be able to meet their needs, keep them safe and provide them with security and stability throughout their childhood and into adulthood.

Prospective adopters are provided with good quality information to ensure that they are informed about the complexities of adoption. There are formal preparation, assessment and approval processes that ensure applicants are suitable to be adoptive parents. However, currently the agency is not, in every case, obtaining applicants' full employment histories, and the stage that prospective adopters are considered to have made a formal application is too late in the process.

The arrangements for permanency planning and family finding are timely and of a good quality and the matching processes are especially strong. This means that children are placed with families who are most likely to be able to meet their needs and help them to reach their full potential. However, the child assessment reports are not being updated in every case.

Support services are delivered in a variety of ways from a range of different services, professionals and agencies; support services are of an outstanding quality, well planned and provide support to meet the needs of all involved. In addition, the agency provides support to adults affected by adoption. It does this in a skilful and sensitive way that ensures that all parties are very well supported and their welfare is protected.

The work of the agency recognises that adoption has lifelong implications for all concerned, including birth parents and birth family members. The efforts to engage birth family in the plans for adoption are very good and independent support accessed via the BAAS is of an excellent quality. Parents' views about their child's adoption are recorded in a sensitive way and this information will be of use to the child should he or she want to access this in the future. Life story work and books and later in life letters are of a good quality but the books and letters are not always provided in a timely way. Contact arrangements between children and their birth families are well supported by the BAAS through a formal agreement.

The arrangements for leadership and management in this agency are strong. The senior managers are relatively new to the authority. They are forward thinking, child focused and very supportive of their staff. Staff employed by the agency are committed in their respective roles and strive to provide adopted children and their families with a high quality service.

Improvements since the last inspection

As a result of the last inspection there was one requirement and eight recommendations made. The requirement has been fully addressed, one of the recommendations is no longer relevant and of the remaining seven recommendations, one has been partly met and six have been fully met.

The agency was required to ensure that children's adoption files comply with the regulations; this has been fully addressed and the files now provide a comprehensive history for the child to access in the future. The agency was recommended to ensure that the health and safety checklist is placed on prospective adopters' files and that the employment histories of prospective adopters' are obtained in every case. Health and safety checklists are now retained on files but the full employment histories are not being obtained in every case. This means that it is not clear if there are any gaps in their employment history or that any gaps have been explored with the applicants. This recommendation has been restated.

The agency was asked to ensure: there are a minimum of 6 monthly reports provided to the executive, this now occurs and means that the members are well informed about the work of the agency; the file audit system is implemented effectively and the personnel files are maintained in line with regulations, both of these issues have been addressed so that files are monitored and personnel files comply with regulations; the decision maker signs the notification letters and panel minutes include the role each member has on the panel, both of these issues have been addressed and now the importance of the decision making process is endorsed

and there is clarity about the role each person on the panel has; a more strategic approach is taken to the provision of support services, this has been achieved and is now a area in which the agency excels.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

There is a recruitment plan to recruit prospective adopters based on the needs of children waiting for an adoptive placement. The current situation is that the agency is not particularly proactive in recruitment activity as enough people contact the agency to enquire about adoption. It has been recognised that this non-targeted approach may not be using resources as effectively as possible and a more proactive approach is planned. However, good use is made of the consortium arrangements and of external resources to ensure that children are placed with families best able to meet their needs. All interested parties are considered in terms of their ability to effectively parent a child from the care system in a fair and non discriminatory way. Good written and verbal information is provided to interested parties so that they are well informed about the complexities of adoption.

The arrangements for preparing people for adoption are of a good quality and help prospective adopters to understand the complexities of adoption. Adopters' comments about preparation included, 'it is really interesting, informative and well run'. There is a formal feedback system for prospective adopters to comment about their experience of the preparation sessions and this is used to develop the course. The presenters provide a report about the prospective adopters' strengths and areas for development based on observations during the sessions. This information is fed into decisions about whether to progress them further, or inform them they will not progress to the assessment stage. The application is formally accepted after Criminal Records Bureau checks have been obtained and prospective adopters have attended preparation sessions; this is not in line with legislation and means that they do not have a formal recourse of appeal if their application is not progressed.

There is a formal assessment process to establish if prospective adopters are suitable to meet the often complex needs of children waiting for a placement. Statutory checks are carried out, references are obtained and assessment visits are carried out to gather information about the applicants' suitability to adopt. This information is analysed in order to identify strengths and any areas of vulnerability. The quality of the assessments are overall good, although the level of analysis and exploration of equality and diversity is variable and the full employment histories are not being obtained in every case to enable any gaps in these histories to be explored.

It is good practice that the manager carries out second opinion visits to prospective adopters as during these visits she explores any outstanding issues or gaps in the assessment. In addition a managers' meeting is held to discuss if the prospective adopters should be progressed to the panel for a recommendation to be made. These practices provide an additional level of quality assurance to the assessment process.

Permanency planning arrangements are robust and timescales for children are good. For children who are likely to need an adoptive placement a family finder is allocated. The family finding process is supported by the development of a detailed matching criteria document that clearly identifies the child's needs. The family finder works closely with the placing social worker to find the best family for each child. Individual workers have developed good working relationships with each other and the teams are now looking to develop more formal links between each other. Matching children with their prospective adopters is one of this agency's strengths. Children are matched with prospective adopters who are best able to meet their needs and the support provided is of a high quality.

Child permanence reports are not always updated. Prospective adopters are verbally appraised of any additional information and addendums to the reports are provided to adopters. Good use is made of the arrangements with consortium members when family finding and external sources, such as the national adoption, register are used. For some children child appreciation days are held and this ensures that prospective adopters gain information, firsthand, from people who know the child and have worked with him or her.

The arrangements for introducing children to their prospective adopters are very good and good efforts are made to prepare the child well for their placement and to familiarise them with their new family. This approach helps children to settle well and begin to form attachments to their prospective adopters. Introductions are arranged with the needs of children in mind but also with flexibility to ensure that the pace suits prospective adopters' needs as well. An adopter said that he was very impressed with the adoption social worker and the agency; this was in reference to the placement processes. He said there was good support and advice provided and went onto say that the social worker was 'friendly and open but remained professional'.

The arrangements for the management of panel are undertaken by the BAAS. The panel is governed by clear policies and procedures that are followed in practice. Prospective adopters' attendance at panel is welcomed and prospective adopters commented that they found it a positive experience and felt they had been handled sensitively; one said the experience was 'empowering'.

The constitution of the panel is as required. Papers are provided to panel members in advance and members scrutinise the documents and devise appropriate questions. The panel is very well chaired by an experienced chair who is suitably qualified, experienced and knowledgeable about adoption and children and families. Panel members are appropriately recruited and their suitability is screened; this ensures

they are suitable people to hear cases and make recommendations. They are provided with support and training in adoption issues and this enables them to carry out their respective roles effectively.

Panels are held in a timely way and additional panels are convened as necessary; this ensures that delays for children are kept to a minimum. Panel minutes are clear, set out the discussion, clearly record the reasons for the recommendation and set out any advice given. The minutes enable proper consideration to be given to the matching and placement processes and help to inform the development of support plans.

The decision making process is robust and decisions are made following careful consideration of all matters relating to each case. The decision is made in a timely way and relayed to all appropriate people in writing.

The managers and the staff of the agency have been through a robust recruitment process and this ensures that they are suitably qualified, experienced, knowledgeable and skilled and can carry out their roles effectively.

The adoption team are trained in the safeguarding procedures and make referrals about any concerns arising to the appropriate team/agency.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

There is a clear strategy for support which uses a range of agencies and professionals including the joint arrangements between the Berkshire authorities using the BAAS. The support services that have been developed internally since the last inspection are impressive and are a real strength of the agency. The services provided ensure children remain in their adoptive family and grow and develop to reach their full potential. One adopter commented 'brilliant support in the last three years the support has turned the life of the family around'.

Support plans are carefully devised and are based on need; there is a review process for the plans to ensure that they meet any change in need. Support can be provided in a range of ways through strong arrangements with other agencies and professionals; this ensures that there is a very good level of choice for people in how to access appropriate services.

Educational support is provided via the virtual headteacher. She supports prospective adopters to access the most appropriate school for the child and ensures that all education plans are developed. The virtual headteacher also provides advice and guidance to schools about the children's needs so that the school can support the child appropriately. This support ensures that children go to a school in which they can best make use of the learning opportunities. The looked after children's nurse is proactive in ensuring that children's health needs are identified and met and there are good links between her and the virtual headteacher. This means that any health

needs that may impact on a child's learning ability are identified and met. The medical adviser is especially proactive in ensuring children's health needs are known, understood and met by the appropriate specialists. Children and families emotional well-being is supported by the therapeutic service; one adoptive mother said of this service 'it is amazing it helped me to see things differently'. The outcome for this family is that the family is now stable and the child is excelling in many areas.

Through the arrangements with BAAS there are an impressive range of support services such as activities, training events, workshops and support groups, which all prospective and current adopters can access. For example, a workshop is held for prospective adopters' extended families and their friends. This informs them about the complex needs and sometimes difficult behaviour children who have suffered adverse background can display. This means they can support the family in an informed way. One adopter said that she wished her whole family could have attended this training as they have found it invaluable. There are regular newsletters and paid membership of a registered adoption support agency, that is run by people who have been affected in some way by adoption; this provides adoptive families with peer support. A worker based in the adoption team also provides a range of guidance and support to people struggling with issues such as behaviours and relationships. One adopter commented that she had found this worker accessible and professional.

Wokingham has not had a disruption of an adoptive placement made by them for a significant length of time; this is a good indicator to show that support is especially effective in maintaining safe and stable placements in which children grow and develop despite their adverse early experiences.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Work with birth parents recognises the life-long consequences adoption has on all involved. The agency works hard to ensure that parents losing their child to adoption are supported to be as involved as possible in the planning for their child. There are also excellent arrangements for providing counselling to birth parents, from a person independent from the agency via the BAAS. Birth parents' take up of this service is impressive.

The agency also recognises the importance of children having clear and unbiased information about their birth family and the reasons why they were adopted. Birth parents are encouraged to provide information about them and their family for children to access in the future. Even though birth parents can find it very difficult to engage in this work the agency manages, in most cases, to obtain important information about the child and his or her early life. The child permanence reports on which the panel bases its recommendations are overall of a good quality and parents views are recorded; however, as already stated, they are not always up to date. Life story books and later in life letters are not always provided in a timely way. This means that not all prospective adopters are able to support their child, with the aid

of these important documents, to help them to understand their situation; however, when completed the quality of this work is good.

In respect of contact after adoption this is managed by BAAS and it is ensured that any contact, whether direct or indirect, is based on the child's needs. There are very effective and efficient arrangements for each contact arrangement and if any support is needed, by any party, it is forthcoming.

The agency carries out work with adult adoptees and birth family members. This work is undertaken in a very sensitive way with due regard taken to the safety and well-being of all parties. Comments about this work made by users of the service include, 'very supportive and helpful counselling went very well, was sensitive to my needs and helped me think through the issues; the social worker was really, really supportive'. Another service user said the service had been 'invaluable' to them.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Issues around equality and diversity are integrated into practice and while the needs of children are at the forefront of the work, prospective adopters and others using the service are treated with respect and sensitivity.

The work of the agency is underpinned by a clear Statement of Purpose and supported by clear policies and procedures. Work with children is undertaken to help them understand what adoption will mean for them and this work is supported by a range of written information.

The information provided to prospective adopters is of a very good quality. Information is given via a range of verbal and written means including a booklet produced by the BAAS. This booklet provides prospective adopters with very detailed information about the matching, introduction and placement processes as well as a raft of other very useful information.

The managers of the agency are skilled, qualified and experienced in children's services and management. They manage the agency effectively and efficiently and good outcomes for children are being achieved.

The staff working for the agency are also skilled, qualified and experienced in their respective roles and are well supported, by the managers, through formal and informal means. Training opportunities for all grades of staff are very good. The

management team recognises the importance of ensuring that staff are kept up to date and have opportunities to develop their professional practice. Adopters are positive about their social worker, one said that the social worker was 'responsive' and others commented on the professionalism of their social worker. The administrative support to the adoption team is especially supportive, one social worker said of the administrative staff that they are 'brilliant, the backbone of the team, the best I have ever had, such good support.'

There are case records for children and prospective adopters that are well maintained and secured safely. For children this means that they have a detailed record of their adoption that they can access in the future. The archiving arrangements are sound and ensure that information is stored safely and securely and is only accessed by those people with a right to see the information.

Records are maintained of complaints and safeguarding issues and this enables managers to identify any trends emerging. Files for staff employed are maintained comprehensively and this ensures that peoples' suitability to work for the purposes of the agency is clearly evidenced.

The agency operates from secure premises that are suitable for its purpose and are open during usual office hours. IT systems are password protected and there are suitable arrangements for the back up of records. In the event of an emergency there are clear plans to ensure that the agency's work can be continued.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- take the formal application to be considered as an adoptive parent prior to the preparation training and before undertaking any statutory checks (NMS 4 and Guidance on the Adoption and Children Act 2002)
- ensure that employment histories for prospective adopters are obtained and any gaps explored (NMS 4)
- ensure that, before a match is agreed, prospective adopters are given accurate, up-to-date and full written information to help them understand the needs and background of the child and an opportunity to discuss this and the implications for them and their family. This is with specific reference to updating the child's permanence report. (NMS 5.2)
- ensure that information about a child's birth and early life is obtained and provided to children and adopters in a timely way. This is with particular reference to the provision of life story work and later in life letters. (NMS 8.2)