

Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Stella Henderson
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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

Wirral'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, placement support and some post adoption support. Contractual arrangements are in place for the assessment of inter-country adopters and for support for people affected by adoption.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The purpose of this visit was to follow up on requirements and recommendations made at the last inspection and to undertake a full announced inspection. All the standards were assessed under the four outcome areas of staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and organisation.

Outcomes for children are good and safeguarding practice is outstanding. Adoption is considered at a very early stage of proceedings and children are protected throughout their journey to adoption. Management of the agency is good and senior management are concerned to ensure that children do not experience undue delay in being placed for adoption. There is good support for adopters and birth families and the agency works well with partner agencies, particularly the children and adolescent mental health service.

The agency fulfils its Statement of Purpose and commitments made to children in the children's guide. Some areas of practice are inconsistent however. For example, the agency ensures that children are given opportunities to express their views throughout the adoption process, but these views are not always captured in their child permanence reports.

Adoption panel is well established and its individual members bring a range of expertise and experience to approval and matching processes. Improvement is needed to ensure a considered recommendation is made in each and every case presented, even if these appear straightforward.

Quality assurance systems are in place to monitor and improve the service that children, adopters and their birth parents receive, but plans to address shortfalls are not implemented in a timely fashion.

Improvements since the last inspection

Two actions were set at the last inspection. These related to ensuring that the content of Child Permanence Reports and children's case records complied with these regulations. Recommendations were also raised to improve practice on procedural and recording issues.

Evidence from this inspection demonstrates that these actions and recommendations have been met.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Children's safety and well-being is given priority and is consistently promoted throughout their journey to adoption. This is achieved by the implementation of range of highly effective safeguarding measures and sustained good practice. Well-established systems are in place which means children are protected in the case of any allegation against their carers. Oversight from social worker visits and statutory reviews ensure that any safeguarding needs, in the widest sense, are identified and addressed. Children know what to do if they have concerns. One young person commented that they knew what to do if they were unhappy with the service 'because I ask if I can have a private word with them when I am not happy and they say 'yes of course you can'.

Children benefit enormously from the importance the agency attaches to their emotional health and well-being. Children and adolescent mental health service(CAMHS) are contracted to provide services specifically to the adoption agency. A Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychotherapist is personally involved at all stages of the adoption process which adds a valuable therapeutic dimension to the assessment, intervention and support for children. This has a significant impact on outcomes for children and constitutes a life-long protective factor in itself. It enables children's specific psychological and emotional needs to be assessed and helps to provide individually tailored plans. This helps children to develop secure attachments to their adoptive parents.

Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services also offer dedicated and highly effective support to adoptive parents. This helps them understand matters of attachment and the psychological needs of their children, enabling them to better manage their children's behaviour. One adopter noted 'we had support from the CAMHS team which was extremely helpful'. An important contribution is also made by the Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychotherapist to adoption assessments,

support to staff, panel meetings and post-adoption services.

Children are successfully matched with their adoptive parents, and the movement to their adoptive placements is managed well. This is a real strength of the agency and the very low disruption rate indicates that children are appropriately matched with their adoptive parents. Foster carers play an important role in this process. One adopter confirmed that the child's transition from the foster home had been managed 'really well' and that the foster carer had given 'really excellent support and advice'. Another adopter noted 'we really felt the child's needs were paramount and that they understood what makes for a smooth transition'.

The majority of children are matched with adopters within the area of the local authority, but use is made of other sources to find the right adoptive parents for the child. One adopter said that they were 'made aware of the national register and other databases to increase our potential for a match'.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Children make a positive start to their adoptive placements because good quality information about their health, behaviour and family background is provided. A second time adopter noted that 'in both cases we were able to see the child permanence report and had full family background on both our children. We were also able to access all medical information'. This helps children to be cared for safely by their adoptive parents.

Children experience effective personal support which enables them to fulfil their learning potential. Adoptive parents are helped to understand how early experiences can impact on children's emotional resilience and ability to learn. Children benefit from specialist support for language and development, and the Looked after children education service ensures that there is effective liaison with education providers across all the key learning stages.

Children enjoy access to a good range of activities which enhances their social wellbeing and helps to increase their confidence, self esteem and social skills. Engagement in the local and wider community is well established to reflect personal preferences and broaden experiences. These range from mainstream sports and leisure activities such as football, dancing and swimming, to specialist resources for adopted children and young people such as a dedicated youth club. One young person noted 'I went to a youth club which was for anyone who was adopted. We never talked about being adopted but we knew if we wanted to there was always someone to talk to. It was great fun'.

Children are given every chance to bond and settle into their 'forever family' because of effective adoption support. This is a strength of the service and is apparent at every stage of the child's journey to adoption. This process begins with excellent and selfless work from foster carers who help to prepare children for adoption. They and

staff provide parents with valuable encouragement and advice. One adopter noted that 'the foster carer was there every day on the phone advising us to try different things which was very helpful'.

Children continue to benefit from the post-adoption support of CAMHS. One young person noted in their survey that 'Mum has been supported by the CAMHS team and has received further excellent advice from post-adoption support. This continues to be very helpful.'

Children and their adoptive parents are also assisted through adoption support groups, a well-regarded tots group and drop in surgery. There are on-going events throughout the year and a regular adoption newsletter. One young person noted 'I enjoy reading the newsletter and have even entered some of the competitions'. One adopter noted that 'we are delighted with the support we have been given. They understand our needs as a family and genuinely care about how we are getting on'.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children are regularly consulted for their views and opinions at various points throughout their journey to adoption, and things change as a result of this. Children confirm that their wishes and feelings are listened to and acted upon. One young person noted that 'I asked for a nice mum and they got me a nice Mummy. They listened to me when I said can they change my name'. Another young person commented that the service listened to what they had to say about re-establishing contact with siblings. 'They said, 'yes I will try to sort it out for you' and they did.'

Children are also able to make their opinions known through the statutory review process and at a corporate level. For example, adopted children wanted the age range of their youth club to be lowered and this was arranged. Adopted children are also able to make their views known through the Children in Care Council. This helps children to feel valued.

Children's interests are served well because in general their child permanence reports contain important information which provides their adoptive parents with a good overview of their child's experiences and which will be of benefit to children in later lives. There is inconsistency however in incorporating children's views into their child permanence reports and a recommendation is set to improve practice in this area.

Children's links with their family of origin is respected. Birth parents and birth relatives are given every opportunity to be included in plans for their children and birth parent's wishes are acted upon where it is appropriate to do so. Adoptive parents are supported to maintain contact arrangements. One adopter noted 'We've been supported by the social worker in writing our first letter to the birth family. She gave us a framework which made the task easier'.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Children's needs are at the centre of a process which is designed to move them quickly to their adoptive placements. The use of a future basing tool ensures that the adoption manager is alert to children who will need adoptive placements. This enables the agency to recruit an appropriate number and type of adopter to meet the needs of children.

The preparation and assessment of adopters is thorough and well organised. Prospective adopter reports are clear and evaluative in nature and the input of the Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychotherapist plays an important role in this process. For example staff have been trained to undertake attachment style interviews, and additional therapeutic interviews can be undertaken if required to assess the suitability of adopters.

Children's needs form the basis of preparation training. One adopter commented that 'we felt that the picture painted by social workers of the adoption process was well-balanced and they clearly laid out the benefits and challenges of the process.' Another adopter said 'we enjoyed the assessment process because it helped us to dig deeper and really think about things.'

Children experience successful outcomes because they and their adoptive parents are supported by staff who have a wide repertoire of skills and knowledge. Adopters and children confirm that they receive a good service from staff who are courteous, respectful and who communicate well. One young person noted that the adoption service 'was very friendly. I was always happy to see them and I felt very comfortable with them'. An adopter commented 'we experienced an excellent service from committed professionals'.

The adoption team manager provides clear leadership and support to the team. One stakeholder noted that 'there is no greater champion for adopted children'. Children benefit because of the manager makes it her business to keep in touch with them either by telephone or through the adopted children's youth club, as well as through more formal means. One young person noted that 'I know I could get help from Sue Leedham if I needed to'.

Children's journey to adoption is well-monitored. Early decisions on permanence and effective systems to track children through the system ensures they do not experience undue delay. Quality assurance at all stages of the adoption process is effective in helping to identify shortfalls, such as consistency in the quality of child

permanence plans and capturing the voice of the child. Plans to change practice in these areas are not implemented in a timely fashion however and a recommendation is raised to drive forward further improvement in this area.

Children are protected because the adoption panel ensures that only those who are suitable to adopt are recommended for approval. Matching is carefully considered and the panel provides useful feedback on the quality of reports and other matters. There is some inconsistency in the extent to which adoption panel makes a considered recommendation in each and every case however. This limits children's ability in later life to fully understand the decisions made about their lives.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Children benefit from intervention which helps them to make sense of their identity and experience. Staff are well-informed about the diverse range of the children and adopters they serve. The agency's recruitment strategy is targeted at a wide range of community groups in order to better meet the unique and individual needs of children.

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):

- actively seek and ensure that in every case children's wishes and feelings are taken fully into account at all stages of the adoption process (NMS 1)
- ensure adoption panel makes a considered recommendation in each and every case (NMS 17.6 - 17.7)
- address promptly any issues raised by monitoring. (NMS 25.2)