

# Birmingham City Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	Marian Denny / Stephen Smith
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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

Birmingham City Council's adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters, both domestic and inter-country; the matching, introduction and placement of children with 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; support to birth parents of children placed for adoption or who have been adopted.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

The service is satisfactory, with some stronger elements of practice within some outcome areas. The service's strengths and challenges are described below.

The service responds promptly to those enquiring about adoption and the information provided is of good quality. Frequent information meetings are held which ensures people are invited to attend these meetings within recommended timescales. However, the service does not recruit sufficient adopters to meet the needs of Black children and those of a minority ethnic group. Consequently, this causes delay for these children in finding appropriate adoptive families.

Excellent preparation training is provided to adopters, which is tailored to meet specific needs of applicants, for example, foster carers, who are applying to adopt. Adopters' assessments are of generally of good quality, though not always completed in a timely manner. These together with the children's needs identified in the child permanence reports enable children to be well matched with adopters. The agency's support services, together with the multi-agency services provide families with good quality support. This helps to maintain the child's placement into adulthood.

Children's health and educational needs are clearly identified. Adopters are excellent advocates for their child, for example, in ensuring their educational and health needs are effectively met. This ensures children thrive despite their often adverse, early life experiences.

Children's wishes, feelings and views, even from younger children are obtained and are reflected in the child permanence reports. However, child permanence reports are of variable quality with some up-to-date, well written and contain good information about children's backgrounds and birth families, while other are of a poorer quality. Children's guides do not contain all the information required.

The adoption service works hard to ensure children are supported to have a positive self-view, emotional resilience and an understanding of their background. Contact is well promoted and adopters are prepared and committed to ensuring contact with birth families. The service is particularly strong in supporting sibling contact. The arrangements for safeguarding children when a concern arises are sound; these include minimising risks posed through contact with or from birth family members via social networking sites.

Every effort is made to involve birth parents and their families in planning for their children's future. However, this is achieved with varying degrees of success. An independent birth parent support service is provided; the take up for this service is low. The service works hard to support birth parents in obtaining information from them for the child. However, information is not always presented in reports and life story books, in an accurate, sensitive and timely way. This means that not all children have the benefit of having good quality information that will help them understand their situation. The service undertakes good quality work with adults affected by adoption including, birth records counselling and intermediary services.

The service has adoption panels, which are efficiently organised, conducted and effective. The agency decision is made in a timely manner and is communicated in the timescales prescribed in the adoption guidance. However, not all files of members on the central list contain all the required information.

Both the management and staff team have considerable knowledge and experience in adoption. They demonstrate a real enthusiasm in their work and are committed to improving child care practice. The controlling, monitoring and quality assurance systems in the organisation though are not robust. This results in some significant delays for children in realising their care plan and being placed in adoptive homes. Additionally, some records are inaccurate, not up-to-date and breach confidentiality. This means children may have access to information unrelated to them and inaccurate records of their heritage.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

Since the last inspection four recommendations have been fully acted upon and two others are work in progress.

Chronologies have been improved. Systems have been developed so adopters are informed of their referral to the National Adoption Register. There have been improvements in the quality and consistency of adoption support plans. Child permanence reports address the different needs of siblings appropriately.

The service is in the process of reviewing support services for birth parents. It is also continuing to improve life story work and life story books. However, neither life story work nor the books are of a consistently high quality or produced in a timely way.

## **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.

The work of the adoption service ensures children are well cared for and they are kept safe. Prospective adopters who are considered unsuitable to adopt are counselled out an early stage. Robust assessments of adopters ensures their suitability and ability to care for children. The service has few enquiries in relation to inter-country adoption. However, it adopts a similar robust approach to this work with thorough consideration being given to the suitability of people applying to adopt from overseas.

Children are well matched with adopters and placements are well supported. Adopters and children receive support and advice on safety matters. For example, training and support are provided in safe care, as well as on the use of the internet and other social media. In addition, work is carried out regarding parenting children with emotional difficulties and challenging behaviours. Work is also undertaken with members of adopters' support networks to help them understand adoption and increase their ability to support the adoptive placement. The service works effectively with other professionals, for example, schools, which promotes children's safety. There are good safeguarding policies in place which are effectively followed and ensures children are well protected.

Prior to a child being referred to the adoption service their health needs are clearly identified. The adoption service ensures children's physical, emotional health and social development are well promoted and effectively monitored. Adopters are able to access services both before and after the adoption order and know who to approach for advice, if required. The panel focuses on children's health and the medical adviser highlights any relevant issues. Prior to matching adopters receive clear reports and are given the opportunity to meet with the medical adviser to discuss the child's medical needs. This ensures adopters have a clearer understanding of these needs and they are able to consider the implications for them and their family in caring for the child. In making an informed choice about the placement, the opportunity for a child to have a stable and successful childhood is maximised.

The adoption placement plan provides adopters with clear information regarding their responsibilities, the decisions they can make and where consent for medical treatment needs to be obtained. Clarity regarding their role ensures they can effectively meet the child's needs. Children's wishes and feelings, including those of very young children are actively sought and taken into account, as appropriate to their age and understanding. Adopters are excellent advocates for their child, for

example, in ensuring the child's educational and health needs are effectively met.

The prospective adopters' reports clearly identify the strengths and vulnerabilities of adopters. The child permanence reports identify the child's needs. Where child permanence reports are of an adequate quality, they are effectively used in the matching process and as a consequence, children are matched and placed with adopters who can meet most, if not all, of their needs. The qualitative nature of the matching process ensures children benefit from a stable home and this is clearly reflected in the service's low disruption rates.

There are elements of delay that occur at a number of points in the care planning process. For example, the adoption team does not become involved and commence family finding at a sufficiently earlier enough stage to avoid or minimise delay. The cumulative nature of these delays are at times significant for some children and prevent them being placed for adoption in a timely way. These delays are not impacting on children's safety. However, they do have an impact on their well-being and it is very much an organisational issue. This matter has therefore been addressed in the organisational section of this report, where a recommendation has been made.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is good.

The adoption service provides adopted children and their families with good support to help them enjoy and achieve. It ensures adopters receive training on their preparation courses to help them understand attachment issues, trauma and to manage challenging behaviour. Adopters can also access workshops on these topics post placement. This training is invaluable as it enables adopters to understand the impact of this on the development, well-being and behaviour of their child. Throughout the matching and introductory stage, individualised work is undertaken with a child to help them develop positive relationships with their adopters.

On placement each family is assessed in relation to support needs and an adoption support plan is developed. These plans are well thought out and focus on supporting the needs of the child and family to promote placement stability.

The service also provides various groups and social activities, such as regular coffee mornings, a summer outing and a Christmas party. Attendance at these activities helps to ensure that families continue to be supported both formally and informally. There is also a weekly 'Stay and Play' session for pre-school children and their parents. This is designed to support attachment and promote parenting using a therapeutic play model and enables regular monitoring of parents and their children as the parents' parenting skills develop. Social workers are skilled at picking up emerging issues during these events and this means that support is provided before issues become too problematic. These groups also provide an opportunity for friendships to develop between the adults and the children attending. This provides a good opportunity for supportive relationships to develop between people who are in

similar situations.

The adoption service works extremely well with other council services and external agencies to provide flexible, effective and well-managed support. It engages closely with health, education and enjoys a particularly good working relationship with the children and adolescent mental health service. This service provides training, a consultative service and will undertake direct work with adoptive families. The children and adolescent mental health service will also provide additional support to an adoptive family if a child has complex medical needs or learning disabilities.

Children are well supported by their adopters to develop their physical, emotional and social skills. They participate in a range of interesting and stimulating activities, for example, dancing and music classes. Children are also encouraged to enjoy outdoor activities and take plenty of exercise. This helps to ensure children enjoy healthy lifestyles.

The promotion of pre-school learning, education and achievement is evident. Children are attending playgroups, nurseries and schools. Children of an appropriate age have personal education plans which identify their learning needs. Adopters clearly value, promote and support children's education.

Children live with prospective adopters whose homes provide a warm, and secure environment for young children. A health and safety risk assessment is in place for each home and this ensures that the environment is safe.

The service provides good support to people whose lives have been touched by adoption. Birth records counselling and intermediary work are well managed. The service also provides support to birth parents of children placed for adoption or who have been adopted. This particular aspect of their work is fully addressed in the positive contribution section of this report.

## **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is satisfactory.

The local authority is committed to ensuring looked after children are consulted, their views listened to and they are provided with the opportunity to participate in decision making. Children's views are well reflected in their child permanence reports. Where children are too young to express their views verbally, reports describe children and their behaviour in order to allow their preferences to be inferred. The service also listens to foster carers' views, taking into account the fact that these are the people who may know the children best. However, while some child permanence reports are well written and contain good information about children's backgrounds and birth families, others are of a poorer quality and contain incorrect and inappropriate information.

Children are supported to have a positive self-view, emotional resilience and an understanding of their background. The preparation and assessment of prospective

adopters is effective in that they understand the benefits to the child in knowing about their birth families and adoption from an early age. They value the information, mementos and photographs provided by foster carers. However, life story work and books are not of a consistently high standard and are not always provided in a timely way. This prevents them being used with the child early in placement.

Contact is well promoted and adopters are prepared and committed to ensuring contact with birth families and is undertaken in a sensitive manner and in the interests of their children. Adopters and children are well prepared regarding safe contact. For example, the agency has done a great deal of work regarding social networking and how to manage this safely. Direct contact with siblings, where this is in children's best interests, is very well supported. There is strong support for contact between siblings separated by adoption, with some very creative work being carried out. For example, in the use of DVDs to support this.

The service operates a large letterbox system to facilitate the exchange of letters and other suitable material between birth parents and adoptive families. Support is available to adopters and to birth family members in writing the letters. Over the years this system has greatly expanded, however, despite the growing number of contacts handled and the increasing pressure placed on the system, it is managed competently and effectively.

Every effort is made to involve birth parents and their families in planning for their children's future. For example, they are encouraged to participate in statutory reviews and the formulation of the child's care plans. Their views are clearly recorded in the child permanence reports wherever possible. They are also encouraged to comment on the information provided. However, not all avail themselves of this opportunity. The take up of opportunities for counselling by birth parents is low and has been identified as an area for development by the service. The views of birth parents and family members are also not routinely sought to inform the development of the service.

Good work is carried out with adults affected by adoption. Considerable care and thought is given to birth records counselling and it is provided in a sensitive manner. Adoptees and other adults using the service are supported to understand the potential impact a reunion may have on them, their family and the birth relative being contacted. This ensures that the work is carried out sensitively, with particular regard being given to the safety, welfare and wishes of all involved.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

## Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. Equality and diversity is promoted in the policies and procedures. It is also effectively addressed in prospective adopters' preparation training and is covered in their assessments. However, the service does not have sufficient adopters to meet the needs of Black and minority ethnic children, who need families. This causes delay, as children have to wait longer for adoptive families.

The adoption agency has a clear Statement of Purpose which accurately describes the service and its operation. This is underpinned by appropriate policies and procedures which guide practice. It has two children's guides to adoption, one suited to older and one to younger children. However, these guides do not contain all the required information. For example, the information regarding the address and telephone number of the registration authority is incorrect. Similarly the information relating to the Children's Rights Director is inaccurate. In addition, the children's guide does not contain information on how a child can contact their independent reviewing officer if they wish to raise a concern.

The service has a recruitment strategy, though this does not effectively address the needs of children waiting to be adopted. This causes delay for some children and results in considerable use being made of other adoption agencies to ensure children are appropriately matched and placed with adopters.

The service responds promptly to those enquiring about adoption. The information provided is of good quality and helps them to understand the adoption process. The frequency of the information sessions ensures that people do not wait undue lengths of time. Adopters are extremely positive about the information meetings and preparation groups. They are also particularly positive about meeting with birth parents and experienced adopters during the groups. Adopters stated that assessments were carried out in a sensitive and thorough manner.

Assessment reports are generally of good quality and the analysis is based on clear evidence. There is a strong focus on an applicant's ability to parent children in a safe way and to meet their varied needs. This ensures that children are placed with adopters who are suitable and able to care for a child. It also enables good matching decisions to be made. While the process is very thorough, in some instances, it has taken longer than the recommended time frame between application and presentation to the adoption panel. Some, but not all the delays, have been due to issues beyond the agency's control. The agency has had a number of enquiries in relation to inter-country adoption, though few have followed this through. Inter-country adoption was not looked at in this inspection.

The adoption panel and the agency decision maker make timely and well considered child-focused recommendations and decisions. The reasons for recommendations are clearly outlined in the minutes. The chair, advisers and panel members have a range

of appropriate skills and knowledge. The quality assurance role of panel is well developed and there are systems in place for the panel to feedback general and specific concerns. The administration of panel is efficient which ensures that members receive the papers with time to read them thoroughly. Prospective adopters attend panels and efforts are made to put them at ease.

The service is managed by skilled, experienced and qualified managers who show a strong commitment to improvement. The adoption social workers are qualified, skilled and very experienced in this work. They are also committed to providing a good quality service to children to ensure they have the best chances in their lives. Social workers are extremely positive about the support they receive, which includes good quality supervision and good training opportunities. Administrative support services enhance the effectiveness of the adoption service and workers are knowledgeable, professional and efficient.

Staff recruitment practices are robust, files are in good order and contain all the required information. However, small percentage of files relating to panel members on the central list do not contain the required information. For example, documentary evidence of relevant qualifications. This does not impact on the safety of children.

Procedures for monitoring and controlling the implementation of the children's adoption plan are not effective. In some cases, there is significant delay in realising the children's adoption plan. This is compounded by external factors which further contribute to delay and are to be addressed by the adoption summit.

There are appropriate policies and procedures in place for case recording. However some records are inaccurate, not up-to-date and breach confidentiality. This means children may have access to information unrelated to them and inaccurate information regarding their heritage.

The premises occupied by the agency are conveniently located and are suitably equipped with information technology and all necessary resources. Arrangements for administration of the agency are well managed.

## **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):

- ensure the agency monitors its performance against the timescales laid down in the Adoption Statutory Guidance (The Adoption and Children Act 2002 Statutory Guidance Chapter 3)
- ensure that the agency is active in its efforts to obtain for the child clear and appropriate information from the birth parents and birth families. Specifically,

ensuring child permanence reports are accurate and are of a consistently high quality for a child to understand their heritage (NMS 2.1)

- ensure that children have an understanding of their background. For example, that life story work and books are of a consistently high quality and provided in a timely way (NMS 2.6 and 2.7)
- improve the quality and frequency of information provided for birth family members and develop a system for monitoring the uptake and effectiveness of counselling services (NMS 12.3)
- ensure that the children's guide to adoption contains information about how a child can contact the Children's Rights Director (NMS 18.6) (breach of Regulation 3.1 of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003)
- ensure the panel's recommendation regarding the suitability of the prospective adopter or adopters is made within eight months of the receipt of the formal application. Where the agency is unable to comply with a timescale or decides not to, it should record the reasons on the prospective adopter's case record (The Adoption and Children Act 2002 Statutory guidance Chapter 3 (1 and 2))
- ensure the adoption agency implements an effective recruitment strategy to recruit and assess prospective adopters who can meet most of the needs of those children to whom adoption is the plan. Specifically for those children, who are black and of a minority ethnic group (NMS 10.1)
- ensure the adoption agency's procedures on the recruitment to and maintenance of the central list of persons considered by them to be suitable to be members of an adoption panel is followed: specifically, that documentary evidence of relevant qualifications is obtained (NMS 17.1)
- ensure there are effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the agency so that children's adoption plans are carried out in a timely manner (NMS 25.1)
- ensure records are clear, accurate, up-to-date and do not breach confidentiality. (NMS 27)