

Bexley Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Setting address	Bexley Council, Howbury Centre, Slade Green Road, ERITH, Kent, DA8 2HX
Telephone number	020 8303 7777
Email	
Registered person	Bexley Council
Registered manager	
Responsible individual	Ruth Murdock
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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

The Borough of Bexley is in South East London.

The council's adoption service falls within the remit of the children's placement service which is part of the wider Social Care and Educational Special Needs of the borough's Children and Young People's Services. The adoption team provides assessment, matching, pre and post adoption support, birth records counselling, intermediary service, duty and fostering service.

The adoption agency is a member of the southeast adoption consortium which is made up of six local authority partner agencies.

The adoption agency's Statement of Purpose includes the range of services available.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced inspection. All the Adoption National Minimum Standards (NMS) were addressed under the four outcome areas of staying safe, enjoying and achieving, positive contribution and organisation.

The adoption service is child focussed and anti discriminatory in its approach to the recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters; however having only one preparation group each year may cause delay in assessment. Applications have been taken after checks have been initiated, however, the robust activities of the adoption staff, panel and specialist advisers ensure all necessary information is obtained. This assists the matching process and enables effective matching of children with adopters. Not all adopters have returned to panel annually for review. A range of support services to adopters is provided, both pre and post order, to ensure families are provided with the necessary support to maintain safe and permanent adoptive homes.

The service recognises the lifelong implications of adoption and the importance of maintaining a child's heritage. Effort is made to engage birth parents and enable them to contribute to their child's future. This greatly assists in ensuring the young people have a well recorded background. However, whilst life work is undertaken, this work is not always completed in a timely manner or photographs retained on file. Reports of birth parents on file are limited in content.

There a well managed letterbox system and assistance with letterbox contact is available.

A skilled counselling and intermediary service is provided to adopted adults and birth relatives. All those affected by the adoption process in Bexley are respected, valued and receive an individually tailored service.

The agency is managed by an experienced, interim consultant with a staff team that have considerable knowledge, experience and skills in adoption. However, the agency's recording of quality assurance lacks consistency and not all policies and procedures have been updated. Some administrative staff have not received training in safeguarding.

Improvements since the last inspection

All the of the requirements from the last inspection on 9 October 2006 were actioned by the unit manager, confirmed in an improvement plan submitted on 9 February 2007.

Assessments are now subject to robust scrutiny as evidenced at panel.

Personnel files are audited by the human resources department, however some shortfalls remain in the files seen as confirmed within the report.

The Statement of Purpose has been updated to reflect Bexley's adoption service.

The re-organisation has addressed the increasing workload for social workers within the adoption service.

The prioritising of attendance for the preparation group is managed according to the needs of young people waiting.

From files seen applications have been taken after some checks have been made, however the unit manager has ensured that the current Statement of Purpose identifies appropriate timescales now.

The Statement of Purpose was ratified by panel but no other policies and procedures relating to panel activity have been discussed at panel, however the progress of cases is reviewed by the panel advisor at each panel meeting.

No different arrangements have been made of a more independent panel advisor, however observation confirms that she takes no part in the final recommendations of the panel.

The timeliness of panels prevents delays in the placement of young people.

Letters to inform prospective adopters of their approval are appropriate.

Evidence of verbal verifications on references are on most files.

Protocols are in place for specialist advisors.

There is evidence that birth parents are invited to contribute to the adoption process.

Some later life letters are written in a timely manner, however there remains an inconsistency of monitoring process confirmed within the report.

Contact arrangements are notified on files.

The adoption social workers offer independent support to birth families during proceeding and before they are case holders.

Caseload management has been central to the recent developmental changes involving the adoption service.

Staff are very positive about the scope of training but heavy caseloads often prevent

attendance.

Social workers have attended safeguarding training either specifically or as an integral part of other courses.

There remains inconsistency in the recording of case file monitoring to support required timescales and quality of reports.

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.

Many of the young people's files sampled are for children too young to contribute their views to the process of adoption. Where this is noted, there is an explanation to confirm their positive emotional state within the placement. Matching addresses ethnicity, culture and religion.

This local authority agency currently has six approved adopters waiting for a match; all but one white British. The longest wait for matching has been a little over two years. There are 14 young people waiting to be placed, of whom four have dual heritage. Six young people have been referred to the adoption register in the last 12 months.

There have not been any disruptions involving either Bexley adopters or young people.

Professionals comment: "there is a need for better funding for services for children with complex needs".

The formal application of the adopters, on the files sampled, has been taken after the preparation course; contrary to Regulations, and prevents a candidate from approaching the Independent Review Mechanism should this be their choice.

The information pack for adopters, given at initial enquiry, contains conflicting information about the application timing.

Cases sampled show evidence of good assessments, either in Form F's or, more currently, prospective adopter's reports (PAR) being well managed and sensitive.

Adopters visited confirm excellent support from their social worker and feel that the process helped them to develop their wider knowledge.

Questionnaires received from seven adopters commented that '...opened our minds to options we might never considered', 'The whole process took a long time due to short staff and sickness'

Some adopters experienced significant delays following their telephone enquiries.

Having addressed the delays the adopters felt that the process was well managed.

Some, who were not kept informed, withdrew prior to completion.

Prospective adopters are subject to formal, thorough, comprehensive assessment, preparation and approval. The preparation course is delivered without discrimination and positive feedback is on file. Adopters say that they found the preparation to be

well balanced and useful, being able to meet adopters who had been through the process. Prospective adopters had the opportunity to meet birth parents; 'which was invaluable and worthwhile' and foster carers.

The home visits include a health and safety checklist and animal assessment. The checklists sampled do not all include looking for blind cords, ornamental weapons or guns, however there is an updated form available.

A second opinion visit is always carried out by a senior social worker.

Adopters found the assessment lengthy, but very thorough and helpful. They described it as thought provoking but not intimidating. All felt that communication is good and they are listened to.

Matching is a positive process. Prospective adopters are given a full knowledge of young people that they are considering. For some, the social worker spent unhurried, quality time to helping the consideration of the Child's Permanence Report (CRP). Adopters valued this significantly.

An understanding of the importance of support for contact with birth families is evident from adopters and social work staff.

There is involvement with the local child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) at matching where there is joint working.

There have been no disruptions and the outcomes for young people are good.

The panel is effective in making quality and appropriate recommendations about the looked after children whose care plan is adoption.

There are few photographs of birth parents on the papers presented to panel and the chair person has requested that this be improved. Descriptions of birth parents are limited, even when there has been contact. Photographs of children are circulated at panel, however, it is not recorded whether these are always attached, or scanned, to the files. Not all photographs are dated and identify the subject in the photograph. Some papers are unsigned and undated when presented to panel. It is uncertain that the reason is recorded or the situation rectified.

Comprehensive discussion takes place during the panel and confirms that all members are prepared in the contents of the papers.

There is evidence that all adopters can meet with the panel advisors to ensure their understanding and currency of information. All adopters are invited to attend panel, and feedback is encouraged from them.

The Adoption Panel is led by an independent and well qualified chair person. All meetings are quorate and the composition of the panel is multi-cultural and balanced in age and gender.

The panel has access to medical and legal advisors at their meetings and members have additional expertise in the adoption process, psychiatry and education psychiatry.

Approved adopters return to panel where no placement has been made.

The panel members have access to planned training to develop their effectiveness; some training has taken place with the adoption service's social workers and placing social workers.

Panel papers are delivered in good time. Some minor amendments are necessary to

the minutes, however the majority are accurate. The panel administrator does not have a discrete photocopier; consequently has to supervise the copying of all the papers for members to meet confidentiality.

The agency decision maker took the role in April 2009; being also the Deputy Director of Social Care and Special Educational Needs. Some decisions made prior to this have been greater than seven days; as evidence by the agency's own audit.

The agency is managed by an interim consultant, who is experienced and qualified. This post holder is leaving the week following inspection. Another interim unit manager is taking the lead, having had a period of handover. Recruitment to the permanent post in January 2010 is nearly complete.

The manager and staff working in the adoption service are suitable to work with children and young people and safeguard and promote their welfare. Vetting is carried out, and as a matter of course the agency repeats Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks every three years. Some social workers have obtained a post qualifying child care qualification, others have managerial post qualifying credentials.

Of the personnel files sampled some did not address all the regulations with interview notes, curriculum vitae with full dates of employment so that gaps could be explored or copies of qualifications signed and dated as original seen. Most files did not contain an index and none reflected an overview to confirm that all matters have been managed before the start date.

Where the agency is awaiting a Criminal Records Bureau check, during recruitment, consideration is made by the Deputy Director for the induction and supervision of the new employee.

Social work staff are trained to meet the requirements at post qualifying standard.

There has been one issue relating to the safeguarding where staff have worked with adopters swiftly and appropriately to a managed outcome.

Records of staff training show attendance at discrete safeguarding courses and also the impact of safeguarding within other courses attended.

Not all administrators have attended safeguarding training.

An historical abuse policy is in development in relation to Bexley. Currently the Pan London procedures are used for guidance.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Adoptive parents are helped and supported to provide nurturing, permanent homes for the young people placed with them. Those visited during the inspection process are positive about the help received.

The agency states that in the last 12 months 78% of the children placed received some support; mostly financial, education or support from CAMHS. Only one request has been made for support in the last 12 months.

There have been no disruption since the last inspection.

The agency has run support groups for adopters in previous years, but is not doing so at present. Adopters can access support groups through the consortium. An annual picnic takes place, which is held in high regard by adopters.

All members of the adoption team are involved in adoption support. Though the social workers are keen to take up this work it places significant pressures where case loads are heavy. The location of the adoption support service advisor (ASSA) is at head of service level to ensure stringent monitoring of outcomes.

Comments by adopters include, 'social workers seem to have a huge workload and are short staffed', 'very supportive of our family-stability of same social worker -vital', 'he has provided the experience and judgement that the other LA SW did not have'.

Some adopters visited have experienced delays in the initial enquiry stage, however they feel the process has moved well afterwards providing a good facility. With the agency's social workers now rotating through Duty, managers are hopeful for an improved service to enquirers.

There are strong working arrangements with the agency and placing social workers which support good outcomes for the young people.

There is significant expertise within the team in relation to counselling birth relatives and adopted adults with welfare and safety of both parties being key.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency's social workers offer support to birth parents all the time that they do not hold case responsibility. There is active support for meetings and exchange of information between the adopted and birth families. Support for birth families is good with meetings arranged, whether or not they choose to attend.

Most of the young people placed retain contact with their birth families. Letterbox provides the initial point for information and advice. Where possible, and in the young person's best interest, face to face or letterbox contact is arranged with siblings.

The evidence on file is that contact arrangements are supervised appropriately to meet the young person's needs. Assessments sampled look at contact being for the benefit of the child, which is most significant, but do not address the development of the individual birth parent.

There is limited quality in some reports in relation to birth parents.

Some birth families have been involved in their life story books. This is very positive and an excellent outcome for the young people, birth families and adopters.

Not all young people placed have a life story book or their later life letter given to them, or their adopters. There is some confusion as to where the responsibility lies for this piece of work and the monitoring of completion.

The lack of photographic evidence of birth relatives is disadvantageous to adopted adults who may wish to see their records of adoption in the future.

The agency recognises that the strategy for working with birth parents needs further development and sign posting to local and national support groups. Social workers

try to actively engage with birth families in post adoption support.

The service has been restructured to support the mixed economy of work being allocated across the adoption team accounting for skills, knowledge and experience. Monitoring by the head of service and deputy director ensures priorities are appropriately managed.

The agency has policies and procedures in place for the services it provides; some have not been updated since 2006.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good.

The agency is working towards its target in recruiting adopters from black and minority ethnic communities. Significant consideration is given to achieving as close a match as possible with regard to ethnicity and belief. Efforts are made to communicate with service users who may have difficulty with written information by providing translations or different formats.

The staff team is multi-cultural and diverse in age and gender. Joint training of social workers and panel members has considered diversity issues within Bexley.

Staff attend training and diversity groups. This information is cascaded down to supported currency in good practice.

The placements of older young people and sibling groups, identified as a target in 2008, are positively managed in Bexley and scrutinised by the adoption panel.

Questionnaires across the borough focusing on the holistic health of all young people in care identify targeted interventions, therapy or assessment opportunities.

Bexley's Gender Equality Scheme, 2007-2010, is promoting equality through the borough.

There is a clear written statement of the aims and objectives of the adoption service; describing facilities and services provided.

Professionals comment: 'workers are very competent with considerable knowledge' and 'the team is professional, under resources and over stretched'.

The younger children's guide is colourful, with good pictures; some children may find it difficult to understand all of the accompanying text.

Guides for older young people also include details of the complaints process and contact arrangements for the Children's Rights Director.

Comments from adopters about the agency include: 'they make experienced judgements' and 'provided us with an experienced, capable, confident, passionate and professional social worker'.

Prospective adopters are provided with information leaflets and a pack. This advises applicants that they may have to wait up to two years before getting on a preparation course as the agency recruits to meet the needs of the young people waiting for adoptive families. The recruitment strategy in place does not clarify how targets will be achieved.

A consortium day is planned during Adoption Week 2009 with Bexley offering a free telephone number for any enquiries.

Lines of communication are embedding following the recent reorganised structure. Staff have high caseloads yet maintain the high standards of practise with their mixed economy remit; adoption, pre and post adoption support, fostering and duty. In the inspection documentation seen adoption social workers are consistently working to good standards.

Appropriate referrals to the Adoption Register for England are being made.

There has been some inconsistency in case monitoring; much of which has been done recently. The unit manager and senior staff of the service supervise their staff. Reports on adoption activity are produced by the unit manager and head of service for the Deputy Director and the Corporate Parenting Forum each quarter. The Lead Member confirmed a wide range of information and data about looked after children through the Children's Council, the forum and Scrutiny Committee together with regular meetings with the Director for Children's Services.

Staffing shortfalls, identified in the children's social care report to the Leaders Committee in June 2009, have been addressed with agency and secondment cover. Recent appointments have been made of qualified social workers. They hold supervisory responsibility for social workers in the adoption team but do not have a current or significant knowledge of adoption work. The unit manager has commissioned an experienced adoption supervisor to provide mentorship for their development.

Staff are supervised and encouraged to attend training.

With only one preparation group each year for prospective adopters some people experience delays. Two prospective adoption withdrew during assessment in 2008; due to undue span of time from initial enquiry.

Staff do not raise training as an issue and found recent attachment style interviewing training very worthwhile. Some staff have attended safeguarding training as a discrete course, others have been updated during additional areas of learning. Not all administrative staff have received training in safeguarding and there is limited use of preparation training for adopters through the consortium.

Storage of case records is appropriately managed. The archive is secure with contents protected from fire and water and a robust management of access and removal of files.

There have been no complaints or allegations within the last year against any member of staff or panel member.

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 that prospective adopters' applications are taken before checks are initiated and information to adopters confirms this (National Minimum Standards 4)
- ensure that staff understand the agency's strategy for working with birth parents to provide life work and that all photographs are attached or scanned to relevant files with subjects authenticated and dated (National Minimum Standards 8)
- ensure that files are monitored timely to include appraisals (National Minimum Standards 17)
- ensure that all administrative staff are trained in safeguarding (National Minimum Standards 23)
- ensure that access to the preparation course does not incur significant delay (National Minimum Standards 4)
- ensure that all policies and procedures are updated to clarify how targets will be met (National Minimum Standards 10)
- ensure that Schedule 3 is fully addressed within the recruitment process (National Minimum Standards 19)
- ensure that all reviews of adopters are timely (National Minimum Standards 10)