



Dudley MBC Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Rosemary Chapman
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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

This local authority adoption service is based at Falcon House near the centre of Dudley. The service aims to provide adoptive families for those children and young people in Dudley for whom adoption is the plan. The adoption team recruits, prepares, assesses, trains and supports adoptive parents, including those wishing to adopt from abroad. It provides counselling for parents whose children are being placed for adoption or who wish to have their child adopted. Counselling is also provided for adopted adults seeking information about their birth families, either through the adoption team or by another agency. The agency has service level agreements with two adoption support agencies to provide some aspects of their adoption support service. The team also undertakes assessments for non-agency applications to adopt.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced full inspection at which all the key national minimum standards were considered. This is a good service in all areas. It works collaboratively with the three other local authorities in the Black Country to provide some aspects of its service, and these arrangements are very effective in offering consistency, prompt response, convenience and choice to enquirers, applicants and adopters.

The adoption agency is very child-focused and has the child at the heart of its practice. Children are safeguarded by thorough and robust procedures to approve appropriate adoptive parents. They are matched promptly with adoptive parents who are able to meet their needs. Adoptive families are provided with good support to enable them to sustain positive relationships. Support needs and how these are to be met are highlighted before a placement is made and when families ask for help. There are good arrangements to provide a range of support, including psychological input, either through the effective use of an adoption support agency or through the in-house resources.

Birth parents are involved in decision-making as far as possible and encouraged to maintain their child's heritage through robust contact arrangements. The agency is well managed at all levels by knowledgeable and skilled managers. Staff are similarly knowledgeable, skilled, experienced and well supported to enable them to provide a good service to children, adopters and birth parents. There are good working relationships between the teams involved with placing children for adoption work, who work collaboratively and share their experience, skills and knowledge to make good placements.

Four minor shortfalls have been identified which do not impact on the well-being or security of children. These relate to the role of panel adviser and recording issues.

Improvements since the last inspection

One action and 11 recommendations were made at the previous inspection. The action related to checks on panel members being undertaken prior to their commencement on the adoption panel. Six recommendations related to the staying safe outcome area, mainly in relation to panel processes, and safeguarding procedures. There were also recommendations in relation to the amount of medical adviser time, administrative support for the letterbox, staffing arrangements, the premises and children's adoption files. The action and all the recommendations have been fully addressed, thus improving the service for children.

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 agency has extremely impressive and innovative systems in place to recruit sufficient and suitable adopters to meet the needs of children waiting for adoption. Recognising the limitations of recruitment within its own geographical boundaries, a decision was taken some time ago to work collaboratively with the other three local authorities in the Black Country and establish a local consortium to improve marketing and recruitment. This is extremely successful; a recruitment and marketing officer coordinates and evaluates the strategy, meeting regularly with the managers of the four local authorities, so that he has an up-to-date awareness of the needs of children waiting for adoptive families and can target recruitment accordingly. He deals with initial enquiries and assists with information events to give a consistent message. Meet the children events are held and a database of local adopters and children waiting has been developed, to further improve the potential for matching. There is a very strong awareness of the needs of children with disabilities and also the need to recruit adopters from a diverse range of backgrounds and cultures.

The adoption team manager has effective systems in place which alert her to children who may require an adoptive family. Permanency planning meetings are held at an early stage to highlight any potential difficulties and formulate plans to prevent delay and drift. There are good and effective systems for identifying appropriate matches according to the well-documented individual needs of children, including sibling assessments. One social worker from the care management team commented: 'I found the matching process to be excellent, the family finder was

extremely thorough when considering the needs of my young person and what issues/support needs might arise in the future.' Decision-making is very clearly documented, and an adopted adult reading their records later on in life would be very clear why a particular family was chosen.

The process of preparation, assessment and approval of adoptive families is rigorous to ensure as far as possible that they can meet the challenges of parenting an adopted child. The preparation training is another example of the collaborative working between the four authorities and provides choice of times and venues for applicants. One adopter commented: 'We realise just how much we learnt and needed the preparation for the challenges faced when raising an adopted child.' Another adopter said: 'The training was excellent and we still use it'. Assessments are analytical and thorough and appropriate checks and references are taken to ensure adopters' suitability. Second opinion visits by the manager add further robustness to the process.

Adopters receive full information about the children they are considering, and have the opportunity to meet the medical adviser to discuss the implications of any health issues. Life appreciation days are routinely held. This enables families to be fully informed about children's backgrounds, needs and circumstances, and prepares them for providing suitable strategies and routines that can meet their needs. Introductions are well planned and appropriate to the needs of the children, to facilitate as far as possible, their attachment to their new parents, and a midway review system is well established to allow for any doubts to be expressed before a placement takes place.

The work of the adoption panel is governed by comprehensive policies and procedures to ensure consistency of practice. It is properly constituted and all panel members have an induction and further training to ensure they are competent and understand their role. The members have a wide range of personal and professional experience which enables them to give robust scrutiny to the work of the agency. There is a well-established practice of prospective adopters attending for their approval which has been extended to invite them for the matching panel so that the whole process is transparent. Although daunting, adopters report that they are made welcome and put at ease, saying: 'The welcome was warm and genuine.' The organisation of the panel is effective; papers are sent out in good time to enable members to give them appropriate consideration. Panel members are well prepared, child-focused and thorough in their consideration of any case before them. Minutes are thorough and give an accurate account of the meeting, although they do not demonstrate the actions taken when a conflict of interest is raised. The adoption team manager currently has the role of professional adviser to the panel. Although the panel benefit from her knowledge of the cases under consideration, she cannot provide more independent scrutiny and quality assurance as envisaged by this role, due to her line management responsibility for the adopter assessments. Neither of these shortfalls impact on the safety and well-being of children. Decisions are made conscientiously and in a timely way after consideration of all available information.

Staff recruitment systems are thorough and robust and demonstrate that workers

and managers are suitable to undertake their responsibilities. Appropriate checks are undertaken, and staff are appropriately qualified with a good range of experience, understanding and knowledge about adoption.

Staff demonstrate a clear understanding of their role in relation to safeguarding and their practice is guided by regular training and appropriate policies and procedures, which include historical abuse.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Adopters are well prepared for the task of parenting an adopted child and supported to do so in a variety of ways once a child is in placement. Social workers develop thorough adoption support plans prior to a child being placed. These detail any known issues where support is needed immediately and formulate an adoption support package. There are good examples when this has been done very effectively, working in partnership with another local authority.

The adoption support team is small, having one full-time social worker, one part-time social worker and four hours of sessional social work time. However, in recognition of this, the agency has service level agreements with two adoption support agencies which provide specific support to adoptive families. They make good and effective use of these arrangements which include regular support groups, training, a buddy scheme, parent consultation scheme, a family fun day and very informative newsletters. The recently appointed assistant team manager has managerial responsibility for adoption support which has been a positive development, enabling clear managerial focus and responsibility. The adoption support services adviser has a strategic link with partner agencies, which facilitates joint working for the benefit of children and young people.

Children, adopters and the agency benefit from good medical and legal advice, which is accessible. The child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) is fully embedded into the adoption service, with a full-time clinical psychologist who works solely with the adoption team. This is particularly useful as it enables adoptive families to have prompt access to professional advice, as well as referral to the multidisciplinary CAMHS team, if this is more appropriate. Social workers in the adoption team can also access advice through regular consultation sessions. Stakeholders have commented: 'In seeking adopters to parent children placed for adoption, Dudley ensure prospective adopters are able to fully meet their current and future needs including health, education and emotional well-being.' Another stakeholder commented: 'In supporting the placement of two children with an adoptive family, Dudley adoption service have accessed therapeutic input, heard and supported the concerns of the adoptive family and worked in partnership with our agency to address the mental health and developmental delay issues arising.'

Adoptive families have been similarly positive: 'There has always been someone there for us all as a family. They are always there on the end of the phone and

always return messages. They are good listeners and the support network is good', and, 'The fact that you can speak to people who really understand what you are going through is so helpful.'

The assessments for adoption support are very thorough and clearly identify the needs and how these can be met, whether through in-house provision, such as therapy or signposting to other services. The social workers are very committed and keen to develop the service further, particularly in relation to links with education and further post-approval training, but are limited by lack of resources and time.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency is committed to involving birth parents in planning for their child's adoption. Social workers, both from the care management teams and the adoption team, demonstrate a real commitment to obtaining the views, wishes and feelings of birth parents in a sensitive and empathetic manner. Where appropriate, for example if birth parents have learning disabilities, independent advocacy services are involved to facilitate their involvement and engagement and ensure they understand what is happening. The child permanence reports record the wishes and feelings of birth parents and they are encouraged to read what is written about them. Although these reports are of a variable quality, the adoption team manager is committed to improving this by offering advice, guidance and training. Social workers described this support as 'very helpful'. The agency has a service level agreement with an adoption support agency which offer an independent support service to birth parents. This is now an opt-out service, to try and maximise its use so birth parents benefit from it.

There is a clear understanding of the importance of a child's heritage, in helping them to understand their past and move forward. Social workers undertake direct work with children to prepare them for adoption, and produce life story books and later-in-life letters of a good standard. Adoptive parents are encouraged to have one-off meetings with birth parents, so they can talk meaningfully to their child about their family of origin, and they also maintain memory boxes to bring the child's past alive. The commitment to maintain a child's heritage is continued through indirect and direct contact arrangements. There is a robust letterbox scheme which includes a proactive prompt system. Birth parents are offered assistance to write appropriate letters and this is supplemented by written guidance. Social workers are also involved in coordinating and sometimes supervising direct contact arrangements, some of which are demanding and complicated, to ensure important relationships, particularly with siblings, are supported.

The support service to adults is carried out through a service level agreement with an adoption support agency, who undertake birth records counselling and intermediary work on behalf of the agency. These arrangements are monitored to ensure the service is appropriate and meeting the needs of the service users.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency has a comprehensive Statement of Purpose which provides very clear information about the service. This is underpinned by up-to-date policies and procedures which reflect the aims and values of the service and inform practice. The children's guide is very well written and gives information in an appropriate way to children who are being placed for adoption, to help them understand what is happening to them.

The information for enquirers is very well presented and professional, indicating the value placed on the service. It gives accurate information about the adoption process and the needs of children who require adoptive families, thus enabling enquirers to make an informed decision about whether adoption is right for them. This is then followed up by information evenings held on a regular basis across the four Black Country local authorities. In response to feedback from enquirers, two more formal events, held earlier in the day, have been established, to offer choice to those interested in knowing more about adoption, with the potential to increase the number of potential adoptive families available to children.

This is a good service which is managed well at all levels by people with the right skills, knowledge, experience and enthusiasm to drive the service forward. The team manager is currently undertaking an appropriate management qualification to further enhance her effectiveness. The management of the team has recently been strengthened by the appointment of an assistant team manager with a specific remit to lead on adoption support. This has been extremely beneficial and has allowed the team manager to concentrate on other aspects of her role. The adoption team are very positive about this addition to their managerial support.

The work is managed effectively; the work of the agency has significantly increased, particularly in relation to family finding for children but there are no identified shortfalls in practice despite this. The manager has prioritised family finding but can access sessional workers to undertake adopter assessments, particularly for those who can offer the best resource for the children.

Managers at all levels are accessible and supportive. Staff are supported and enabled to develop by regular supervision and training and good administrative support. The social workers are committed, child-focused and knowledgeable about their roles and responsibilities.

A strength of the agency is good collaborative working relationships between the adoption team and the care management teams, and with other adoption agencies, which either provide families for Dudley's children or children for Dudley's adoptive families. A social worker commented: 'There is good collaboration between the care management and adoption teams. I feel I have been mentored by the family finder.' Other social workers commented on 'fantastic working relationships' and said 'you can always speak to someone and get a positive response'. Other agencies have commented: 'I welcome the opportunity to work with Dudley. They are thorough, competent, work in partnership and are committed to achieving positive outcomes for children. They are professional and child-focused', and, 'communication, information-giving, organisation and an ability to build and sustain excellent relationships are amongst the strengths'.

There are good monitoring arrangements, both by the team manager and the executive of the council, to ensure the service provided is of a good quality and meets the needs of children. There are good tracking systems to monitor the progress of cases and is a systematic approach to permanency planning to prevent delay or drift. The council receive a very thorough annual report which is supplemented by quarterly written and verbal information. They are interested in the adoption service and keen to understand and scrutinise its work. They recently had a meeting to further enhance their knowledge and understanding, and thus make them more effective in their monitoring role.

Case records on adopters and children are well maintained, well organised and stored with appropriate security, and arrangements for archive and retrieval are robust. However, there is no evidence on the case files of case decisions made in supervision or regular file audit. Personnel and panel members' files are similarly well organised and demonstrate a rigorous approach to the recruitment and selection of staff, including those employed on a sessional basis.

The premises are accessible and have been improved since the last inspection, with the addition of improved reception facilities, security, and interview facilities. Appropriate business continuity arrangements are in place in the event of an emergency.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Children's individual needs are thoroughly assessed and there are clear matching procedures to ensure these are met as far as possible. All the documents show images of children from a variety of cultures, the agency demonstrates a commitment to providing good quality services to anyone irrespective of their individual circumstances, and approvals of adopters are dependent on their ability to meet the needs of children waiting for adoptive families.

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 minutes of panel meetings are accurate and informative and clearly state the panel's discussion, reasons for conclusions reached and all recommendations made, with specific reference to how conflicts of interest are dealt with (NMS 12.3)
- consider who should undertake the role of panel adviser (Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 Regulation 8(1))
- ensure decisions by supervisors are recorded on case files and are legible, clearly expressed, signed and dated (NMS 25.3)
- ensure there is a system to monitor the quality and adequacy of records and remedial action is taken when necessary. (NMS 27.3)

