

North Yorkshire County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority 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

North Yorkshire County Council Adoption Service is a county-wide service. Adoption services are delivered through the Children's Social Care Service unit and include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters. The service also contributes to the matching and placement of children with adopters.

The service provides a full range of resources to all those affected by adoption. This is delivered in-house by the council's own staff as well as through successful partnerships with other organisations.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

The purpose of this visit was to undertake a full inspection. Outcome areas for staying safe, enjoy and achieve, positive contribution and organisation were assessed.

Children coming into North Yorkshire County Council Adoption Service receive outstanding quality of care. Assessed from the point at which they are admitted to the service, children make significant progress and achieve demonstrable and measurable improvement across all outcome areas.

Children's needs are central to the running of the service and they are provided with stability and safety throughout the adoption process. This enables them to achieve, develop and reach their potential and enhances their capacity to develop secure attachments and trust.

The quality and content of children's permanence reports and prospective adopters reports is excellent. The adoption panel provides stringent scrutiny of cases brought to it for consideration of both approvals and matches. The needs of children who require life-long placements is met by effective recruitment strategies. Careful and successful matching underlines the service's determination to find the right family for children.

The service has substantial strengths and a sustained track record, and where areas of development emerge these are recognised and effectively managed. Procedures are in place which make sure that children are protected and kept safe from abuse. Experienced and well-qualified staff are supported by clear policies and procedures, supervision and relevant training.

There is strong and clear leadership of the service. Effective monitoring ensures that children do not experience undue delay and that they enjoy successful and fulfilling

lives.

Two recommendations are raised which relate to procedural matters and which have minimal impact on outcomes for children.

Improvements since the last inspection

No recommendations were raised at the last inspection.

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 in this authority experience huge emotional and developmental reward in their journey to adoption. Prior to adoption, and in the hands of highly skilled and competent foster carers, they enjoy care which is consistent, predictable and nurturing.

Children are safe and indicate by their behaviours and comments that they feel safe. All aspects of their well-being are promoted by a range of robust policy and practice measures. These include on-going assessment, statutory review and close observation. These checks and interventions actively address the effects of previous significant harm and staff are highly vigilant about the safety, health and well-being of children throughout the adoption process.

Children benefit from having very few placement moves before they are placed with their adoptive parents. This provides them with an important foundation of stability and security. Decisions which will shape a child's future are made generally within recommended timescales. Children experience as little delay as possible before moving to their adoptive families. This is because there is excellent senior management oversight of the movement and progress of children who need adoptive families.

Investment in time and energy in creating secure matches means that children are unlikely to experience placement disruption. Extensive discussion and exploration is undertaken to ensure that children are suitably matched to adopters who can meet their unique individual needs.

Children are linked, through careful consideration, with potential adoptive parents and any proposed match takes priority at adoption panel. Once agreed, children generally move very quickly to begin their lives with their 'forever families'. Placements are made with sufficient time for introductions and when children

express any concerns they may have about the placement, the service acts on these concerns. One stakeholder described a recent case as: 'outstanding from the point of view of planning, matching and moving stages: an extremely supportive and well-planned process for the child involved.'

Foster carers and family support workers provide crucial support in helping prepare children for adoption. This gives children an excellent opportunity to experience positive attachments and make a successful transition to their adoptive families. One adoptive parent noted that the work undertaken with their child 'had paid dividends' and enabled their child to 'cope really well' with the move from foster carers. Another adoptive parent commented that 'of all the parts of the process, the transition to our home was managed extremely well'.

Children thrive and flourish in the care of their adoptive parents, who are extensively assessed and vetted. Adoptive parents confirm that they receive sufficient background information about children placed with them. They commented enthusiastically on the usefulness of Life Appreciation days. One said 'fantastic - the best part of the information giving process. It really helped me to understand what my child had experienced'. Another commented that it had been 'invaluable - I wrote to the service to say how well it had gone'.

Adoptive parents are enabled to meet the current and future needs of their children. This is because staff work hard to obtain the fullest social and medical history about children, particularly their birth family medical history. Adopters are therefore enabled to understand and manage the physical, emotional and psychological needs of the children placed with them.

There is highly effective work with colleagues in primary and specialist health care services. One adopter commented how helpful it was to be able to 'meet and discuss issues with the paediatrician and child and adolescent mental health worker'.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Children are provided with highly detailed permanence reports and other documents and records such as life story books. These provide a sensitive and honest account of their early life and journey to adoption. This upholds the child's right to have a clear picture about their birth family history and explanation of why decisions have been made.

Children and their adoptive parents receive substantial support throughout the adoption process, which helps to sustain these placements. Children's social and emotional development is successfully promoted, enabling them to develop sound attachments to their adoptive parents and develop emotional resilience.

Children's educational and learning needs feature strongly throughout the adoption process, and there are effective links with education providers. One stakeholder

noted the 'excellent communication' with schools and early years providers. One adopter commented that the local primary school had been 'fantastic' with her child, enabling the child to exceed learning and developmental milestones.

Children develop their confidence and self-esteem through a variety of extra-curricular and social activities. For example, children participate in dance classes, football, horse riding or playing musical instruments. This provides them with opportunities to flourish and fulfil their optimum potential and involves them in their immediate and wider communities. This helps to reinforce in the child a sense of self, belonging and identity.

The service is sensitive to the needs of birth parents who can access support when they need it. Birth parents are offered practical assistance should they require it, for instance in composing letters to their children. This support continues in some cases for several years after the adoption. One birth parent commented that 'staff have been excellent - I've got no complaints'. Another birth parent noted that they were helped to understand what was happening and that their questions were answered 'without using fancy words'.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Inclusive practice is a strength of the service. The unique needs of each child are promoted, and within sibling groups this is given particular attention. This is highly beneficial to children as it ensures their individual needs, including cultural, religious or disability related ones, are central to the assessment, care planning and matching processes.

Children are placed with adopters whose preparation explores the issues and impact of diversity and stresses the importance to the child of their birth family heritage. These measures provide children with an excellent basis on which to establish a positive sense of identity.

Children are enabled through play, art, direct work and the statutory review process to express their wishes and views about adoption. Where children are too young to express their views, staff observe their behaviour to better understand what they may be feeling and experiencing.

Children have a voice both at an individual and corporate level. The adoption panel makes it their business to ensure that children's views and wishes are fully represented. The service listens to what children have to say and demonstrates that they place value on those views and opinions.

For example, one adoptive parent explained that their child had been asked about the type of family preferred and expressed the view that it should have a dog. These wishes, amongst others, were taken into account in the matching process. Following requests from both adoptive and birth children their attendance at adoption panel

was facilitated. The Adopted Young People's Participation Project is particularly influential. As a result of their input, the preparation training for adopters now includes a specific element delivered, through DVD, by young people themselves.

Children's interests are paramount where contact arrangements are concerned. Very careful consideration is given to the impact on children of any proposed contact and the risks to the stability of their adoptive placement.

Birth parents have an opportunity to specify to some extent the type of family in which they would like their children to be placed. For example, the wish of birth parents for their children to be brought up in a particular religious environment has been facilitated.

Children's birth parents understandably have strong views about adoption, but the service works hard to maintain honest and supportive relationships and involve them in plans for their children's future. Birth parents noted that staff 'listened to me and my concerns' and 'went through ways of how I could complain'. They also have the opportunity to contribute to their child's permanence reports by completing a section on 'what would you like your children to know about you and your childhood'.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The efforts and determination of highly experienced and competent management, staff and foster carers contrive to give children an excellent start in their adoptive placement. This is achieved because children are enabled to fulfil their potential with adoptive parents who have been carefully prepared and understand the life-long nature of adoption.

Adopters speak very highly of the level of support, pace and content of the preparation course and the assessment process. One adopter noted the 'excellent level of support through the preparation course' and that 'comprehensive information was given with the opportunity to ask questions'. One adopter commented that 'we had excellent support - the process was clearly explained throughout'. Another adopter said that the assessing social worker enabled them to 'trust him and feel comfortable' and was 'lovely, supportive and professional'.

Children's needs remain central to these processes however, and the service is clear with adopters about what kind of children need placements. One adopter commented that the service 'was honest and pulled no punches' about the challenges ahead. A stakeholder noted that: 'all the adoption workers, managers and

support workers are excellent at communicating and are able to keep the child at the centre of the decision-making process. The workers are very knowledgeable, dedicated and committed to providing a high standard of service.'

All staff maintain very effective working relationships with adoptive parents and colleagues. One stakeholder commented that 'there is good communication. I have always felt that children are the priority'. Another noted that 'the adoption service is really good and reflects the very committed workers who want the best outcomes for children and are prepared to go the extra mile'.

Children's welfare and safety is central to adoption panel deliberations. The panel is chaired by an expert in child care who along with an agency adviser and other panel members brings a wealth of expertise to proceedings. They ensure that children are properly placed for adoption only with those who will offer safe, secure and nurturing homes.

Social workers feel strongly that the adoption panel is robust and very challenging; 'you really need to have all the reports in place with strong arguments for adoption'. Adopters described their experience of attending panel as 'a little nerve-racking but good'. They confirm that they were made to feel welcome and one adopter noted that panel 'asked some very clever questions'.

Children benefit from the guidance and intervention of staff who are highly motivated, skilled, knowledgeable and well-qualified. This includes family support workers who are committed and resourceful and provide an excellent service to children and their adoptive parents.

The adoption team is led by a manager who has extensive adoption experience and expertise, and who is described by staff as being 'supportive, approachable and open to ideas'. The manager ensures that the service works in the very best interests of children. Evidence from this inspection confirms that the adoption service complies with its Statement of Purpose and fulfils its commitment to children as set out in the children's guide.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Children receive a service which meets their unique and diverse needs. For example, children are matched with adopters who do not share the same ethnicity, but who can nevertheless successfully meet the child's other identified needs. Prospective adopters are drawn from all sections of the community and includes same sex couples. Consideration of 'difference' is integrated throughout the operation of the service. This ranges from discussion with prospective adopters about how being a member of a minority group can lead to disadvantage and oppression, to training on 'what makes a Dad?'.

The manager has excellent oversight of the operation and performance of the service, enabling clear identification of the services strengths and areas for development. The work of the service is very well monitored at all levels of the organisation. The manager provides a report for the executive, but only once rather than twice a year as recommended in these standards. Monitoring also lacks some

attention to the extent to which some documents and records are 'adoption aware'. A recommendation is raised therefore to improve practice in this area.

Close attention is paid to ensuring that case files and records fully represent children's history, needs and experiences. All files are methodically arranged and are stored in compliance with these regulations.

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):

- improve monitoring of records to ensure compliance with the agency's policies and identify any patterns and trends (NMS 25.2)
- supply written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the agency every 6 months to the executive of the local authority. (NMS 25.6)(a)