

Stockton on Tees Borough 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

This is a local authority adoption agency that undertakes, or makes arrangements for, all matters relating to the adoption of children under current legislation. It recruits, prepares, assesses and approves adoptive parents, and places children with them. The agency supports adoptive placements, supports children and adults affected by adoption, and arranges for birth parents to be counselled and supported.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This was an announced inspection of the adoption service. The purpose of the inspection was to evaluate its performance against the adoption national minimum standards. The outcomes for staying safe, enjoying and achieving, positive contribution and organisation were inspected. The adoption service's promotion of equality and diversity was also inspected.

This is an outstanding service where outcomes for individual children are excellent. The service works in partnership with other sections of the local authority, to ensure that there is a clear focus on ensuring that professional and ethical decisions are made, to provide stable permanent families for children.

The service is very well managed both strategically and operationally and has improved practice since the last inspection. Assessments are of a high quality clearly demonstrating the experience of the stable established team of staff. A strength of this service is the very low level of disruptions. This is due to the high level input into careful selection of prospective adopters at the beginning of the process. However, where applicants to adopt are counselled out, more consideration is required in the way the discussion has progressed. This is to ensure that the applicants have participated in the decision not to proceed and are satisfied with the outcome.

The adoption panel provides an effective oversight to all cases presented for matching or approvals. The preparation and training of adopters provides them with a sound basis for meeting the challenges of adoption. This helps to ensure that children who are to be adopted, are placed with the best possible match in a timely manner. Adopters are positively supported throughout the adoption journey, and every effort is put in by the staff to make this as smooth a process as possible. Contact with birth parents is managed with sensitivity in an open and honest way and they are actively encouraged to participate in the adoption process.

Assessment reports are very well written, providing clear information for the panel, in order to enable appropriate recommendations to be made to the agency decision maker. Some information contained in later in life letters however, do not always

contain sufficient explanatory information about decisions taken early in a child's life.

The approach to equality and diversity is outstanding and the service ensures that this is reflected in all areas of the activities associated with the adoption process.

The service is supported positively at a corporate level within the authority and indicates a service that is valued by the organisation. The strong leadership from the manager and effective monitoring of the performance of the service, means that children requiring permanent families are well served.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection a number of recommendations were made to improve the adoption service.

Recommendations were made to improve the quality of child permanence reports, review the panel procedures, improve the recruitment procedures and to ensure that life-story work is completed in a timely manner. The service was additionally asked to ensure that case files contained evidence of supervision decisions, that administrative and other records were monitored for quality, and that panel members human resources records were accurate.

The adoption service has addressed all the recommendations.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The children are cared for by very competent and well trained adopters, who have a clear understanding of their responsibilities to ensure that health and safeguarding considerations for the children are fully met. All aspects of their care and well-being are promoted by ensuring that adopters are kept fully informed about aspects of each child's health needs and their social background. This is addressed through assessments, statutory reviews and ensuring that all relevant services are involved in every aspect of a child's care. The quality of information maintained by the service about the children is very high. This informs the adopters in their day to day care of the children.

A strong feature of the service, is the care and attention to detail taken by staff to ensure that children benefit from stable placements, and that the matching is thoroughly thought out. This provides them with stability and security. The

assessments made of prospective adopters coupled with the excellent quality of the Child Permanence Report (CPR), enables staff to come to safe decisions about placement matches. There is excellent management oversight of the movement and progress of children who need adoptive families. Through this detailed process, the investment in time and resources in creating secure matches, means that children are unlikely to experience placement disruption. Extensive work is undertaken to ensure that children are suitably matched to adopters who can meet their individual needs. Adopters commented positively about the high standards of professionalism demonstrated by the staff. They are treated with respect and made to feel as full partners in this complex process. Of particular note, is the strong support received by adopters from the foster carers who work positively to make the introduction and eventual move as seamless as possible. One adopter stated, 'the foster carer was marvellous and very supportive in what must have been an emotional time for her as she had had the child from birth.' This gives children an excellent opportunity to form attachments with their new family and make a successful transition.

It is evident that the children are well placed and they receive care and emotional attention from adopters who have been selected through a robust selection process. The service ensures that it adheres to strict timescales to prevent drift and delay. Adopters are fully involved at all stages of the adoption process. This enables the service to monitor the performance of adopters and to address any issues that emerge.

The service has not been regularly used for inter-country adoptions. However, it maintains an expertise through one social worker who has experience in this area work and who keeps up to date on information through training and consultation with a national voluntary organisation.

The safety of children is of paramount importance and all staff involved in adoption work, understand the process to follow if any allegations or suspicions of abuse. Any such situations have been appropriately responded to and concluded properly in line with safeguarding procedures. These measures promote the safety of children.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Prospective adopters are very well matched with children. This is based on the comprehensive and detailed permanence reports and other assessments that take place. These reports are prepared with great care and insight, enabling very good decisions to be made in respect of the placements. The preparation training introduces the adopters to the challenges they may face, and as pointed out by one adopter, 'we found the preparation to be excellent and really went into detail about the challenges ahead for us.' Prospective adopters receive substantial support throughout the adoption process. This positive input substantially reduces the risk of disruption of the placement.

Children's social and emotional development is positively promoted, enabling them to develop strong emotional attachments to their adoptive carers. They are encouraged to follow their hobbies and interests and to maintain contact with those who are deemed important to them.

The promotion of educational achievement is strongly supported by adopters and good liaison links are firmly established with schools. It is evident that the service and adopters appreciate the value of a good education, and they are positive in supporting the children to develop their potential in this field. This positive approach to education is actively monitored through the statutory review process.

A stable caring and suitable homely environment is very important to children who have experienced disruptive backgrounds. The adoption service chooses its carers well, and children enjoy living with adopters who have a strong commitment and attachment to them. This provides the children with opportunities to develop and achieve their potential and helps to reinforce a sense of self, belonging and identity.

Children and adults affected by the adoption process are able to receive confidential sensitive advice and guidance from an independent support service. Birth parents in particular are automatically referred to this service and they decide whether to utilise the support available. The adoption service takes its responsibilities seriously. This is promoted by ensuring that those involved in this emotional and demanding process are supported in a sensitive and caring way. Prospective adopters comment positively about the service, 'I cannot praise enough the support we received from the adoption service.' The preparation training for prospective adopters is thorough and detailed. This approach ensures as far as possible that children are placed with people who have a realistic attitude about the demands of adoption. One prospective adopter commented, 'we found the preparation to be excellent and really went into detail about the challenges we may encounter.'

The children live in comfortable family homes where there is much emphasis on safety and ensuring a stimulating environment of the children. Adopters demonstrate a positive commitment towards encouraging the children to enjoy themselves through leisure activities and pursuing personal interests.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The prospective adopters are selected for their positive and mature attitudes to life. They work closely with the social workers who ensure that they are very well prepared for their roles as parents to children who, in most cases, come from very damaged backgrounds. 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.

Life story work is key to establishing the background history for children and this is an area of work that is of a high standard. Since the last inspection there has been a strong push by the management to ensure that life story work is improved with good clear information, mementos and photographs of the child's life since coming into care. There are however, some examples where the life story work is not always completed at the second statutory review. There is a commitment nevertheless, to meet the required timescales and the Independent Reviewing Officers maintain a strong oversight of monitoring the progress and standard of this work. The quality of information contained in these books is impressive with clear evidence of sensitive work having been undertaken. These are personalised to the child and will provide a very good insight into the child's early life. The later in life letters form a key part of the child's story. These are prepared by the child's social workers and some require more explanation as to the actions taken when the child was removed from the birth parents. The letter box system is managed well and forms an important element of the contact arrangements.

Although adoption has been decided as the best way forward for a child, the service is sensitive to the needs of the birth family and where possible contact arrangements will be organised. This is clearly an emotional area of work and very careful consideration is given to the effect this may have on the child.

A positive approach is taken by the service to the involvement, where possible, of birth parents in the adoption process. This is recognised as a very sensitive area and very good use is made of the adoption support service to work with the birth parents. The views of birth parents are taken into consideration in respect of specific wishes such as religious and cultural requests. The service demonstrates a very open and honest relationship with birth parents, and operates in an honourable and ethical way in what is clearly a difficult and emotionally charged environment.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. There are clear policies in place advocating respect for all groups of people within the community. Applicants to become adopters are selected through a system that ensures those who can provide children with a loving, safe and stable family environment are chosen. The service recruits adopters from a wide spectrum across the community. A particular strength is the positive work undertaken to increase the representation of minority ethnic prospective adopters. This is enhanced through a regional partnership arrangement

with a voluntary body specialising in recruitment from the different cultural groups. In addition the service reaches out to those couples who are of the same sex. Comprehensive training and support is available to this section of the community. There is access to interpreters who can communicate to those where English is not their first language. The religious and cultural wishes of birth parents is respected, where possible, when deciding where to place a child.

Inter-country adoptions are not a significant area of work undertaken by this service. However, if required an experienced member of the team will coordinate this work.

All decisions made about the children placed for adoption is considered by the adoption panel who make well thought out recommendations. This is a complex process that is carried out with professionalism and efficiency. The process of approving prospective adopters is undertaken with rigour and scrutiny by the panel. This ensures that only those who have demonstrated their suitability to be adopters, and who can provide for the needs of children requiring a permanent home, are recommended for approval. This supports children to enable them to grow up in stimulating and nurturing families. The service is efficient at only recruiting those who are able to meet the exacting requirements of being an adoptive parent. This is demonstrated by the lack of disruptions. However, where applicants are counselled out, more detailed consideration needs to be given to the process, to ensure that the applicants feel that they have made the decision to withdraw.

The Statement of Purpose clearly sets out the primary aims of the service. This is to ensure good outcomes for children during the adoption process. The children's guide is very well designed and is age appropriate, explaining to the child each stage of the adoption process.

The service is managed by a competent and experienced manager, who along with a committed team, strive to continually improve outcomes for children. Adopters are extremely satisfied with the high standards of service, support and preparation. They feel very much a part of a well organised team. The success is in large part due to the careful vetting and selection of staff who have a commitment to adoption work. The panel ensures that information presented is accurate and enables the members to reach decisions that have a favourable impact on children. As pointed out by a social worker, 'I would rather face the courts than panel, they really put you through the mill to check out if adoption is the best course to follow for a child.' It is clear that the needs of the children are central to the whole adoption process. Adopters are very positive about their involvement with this service, and describe in glowing terms, how well they have been supported.

This is a service that is very well managed and an excellent oversight is maintained of the day to day operations. Staff are supported by the manager who provides formal supervision and appraisal for each member of the team. This promotes excellent practice. Records are continually monitored to ensure relevant high quality information is recorded that contribute to an understanding of a child's life. All records are stored in a secure environment in compliance with the 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):

- ensure that the correct procedure for counselling applicants out and withdrawal of applications is followed and recorded (Adoption Guidance Chapter 3 para 54) (NMS10.1)
- ensure that later life letters are realistic and sufficiently detailed so that the young adult fully understands their life before adoption, why they could not remain with their birth parents and why they were adopted. (NMS 2.8)