

Cumbria 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

Cumbria County Council adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with adoption. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters. The Council commissions a service from a voluntary adoption agency for those wishing to adopt from overseas.

The agency provides support for adoptive placements and post-adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, including birth records counselling and intermediary work. The service operates a letter box system to support contact between adopted children and their birth parents and provides support to birth families.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Outcomes for children are good. They benefit from a wealth of good practice and receive individualised care and support which reflects their diverse needs very well. Children benefit from outstanding practice in relation to education and adoption support. Their emotional and psychological needs are well promoted and staff work creatively and use a range of resources to promote healthy attachments.

The service works effectively with other professions to promote children's safety. Procedures in place ensure that children are protected and kept safe from harm. The adoption panel acts as an effective safeguarding mechanism in its scrutiny of prospective adopters and placement matches. There are no weaknesses relating to health and safety issues.

Staff are competent and committed to achieving positive outcomes for children. The staff team have experience as well as relevant training in how to care for and work with children who need permanence through adoption.

Some areas for action and development are identified. The views and wishes of children are not always apparent and the child permanence reports are inconsistent in terms of compliance with the regulations and quality of content. The recruitment strategy does not satisfy the needs of all children and quality assurance systems are not robust enough to monitor and improve the quality of care that children and young people receive. Panel does not record reasons for its recommendations.

The provider took steps to address some of these shortfalls during the course of this inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

The majority of recommendations raised at the last inspection, concerning health and safety, recruitment, life story work and some procedural issues, have been met. These improved measures mean that children are better safeguarded and have a greater understanding of their life before adoption. A recommendation to improve the quality of child permanence reports has not been met however, and an action is raised to further drive forward improvement in this respect.

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.

Children make good progress across all aspects of their development from the point at which they enter the service. Their health needs are fully identified and met throughout the planning process. Health assessments provide adoptive parents with a sound understanding of their children's health needs. One adoptive parent commented, 'we were amazed at the details given to us about our child - birth details, hospital notes and photos'. A stakeholder noted that, 'all medical information is shared with adopters which ensures the medical needs of children are known and addressed.'

Children are carefully prepared for adoption and once the match is agreed they move quickly to begin life with their adoptive parents. Staff undertake specific work with children to help with this important process and excellent support is provided by skilled, selfless foster carers. One adopter noted that introductions were, 'handled very well and went exactly to plan', another that, 'children are very well prepared before the placement'. One adopter noted that her own children were also well-prepared and commented that, 'our seven year old daughter had her own social worker and was seen on her own.'

Children benefit from effective safeguarding throughout their journey to adoption. They are protected by a range of measures including sound child protection procedures. For example, prospective adopters are suitably vetted and any concerns expressed by children concerning their safety or welfare are promptly responded to. The adoption panel exercises stringent analysis and scrutiny of prospective adopters. This helps to ensure that children are matched only with those adopters who can provide life-long nurturing, safety and security. The panel does not clearly identify or record the reasons for those recommendations however which fails to contribute to children's future understanding of decisions made about them.

Children are protected because comprehensive health and safety assessments are

undertaken prior to their placement. Staff ensure that any actions identified to safeguard children in their adoptive homes are implemented. Young people are given sound advice, support and guidance about emerging safeguarding risks, for example in the use of social networking sites. Contact arrangements fully take into account any safeguarding issues and the needs of children.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Children receive excellent support to fulfil their academic and learning potential. As well as ensuring that formal education needs are met, the service ensures that children's particular interests, hobbies and talents are nurtured. This holistic approach helps children to overcome past disadvantage, boost their self-esteem and bolster their emotional resilience.

Children's ability to progress and achieve is supported from the very earliest stage. Assessments from early years providers help track children's development and inform the planning process. Personal education plans are in place for each child, including 'baby personal education plans'. Specific training courses on education for adoptive parents are positively evaluated. This equips parents with the additional skills, understanding and confidence to enable them to meet their children's needs.

Children benefit enormously from extremely effective liaison with a range of educational providers and professionals. One stakeholder commented: 'There are strong links between the virtual school team and the adoption service. For example, we run joint training courses in schools, provide education reports to panel and advise adoptive parents when required.'

Children receive outstanding adoption support. This ranges from highly individualised intervention to address specific individual needs to a range of training courses delivered to adoptive parents. This includes events such as: 'Building Secure Attachments in Adoptive Families' and, 'Strengthening Families - The Teenage Years!' This empowers adoptive parents and ensures that their children's life-long needs for support are met.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency supports birth parents to be involved in the planning for their children's future. It encourages them to express their views about the plan for adoption for their children and to provide information for the child in later life. This gives children a sense of their heritage and identity.

For example, meetings between birth and adoptive parents take place where this is appropriate and helpful. The service works effectively with birth parents to provide photographs and information for children's life-story books. One birth parent noted

that they had been able to meet with their child's adoptive parents and that this was 'very reassuring'. This birth parent commented that, during this very difficult time, staff had been, 'supportive, kind and very understanding.'

Children are enabled to cultivate a positive self-view and develop emotional resilience. This is achieved through careful preparation of adoptive parents and by the interventions of skilled workers who understand the therapeutic nature of their work. Staff have a range of useful resources and have received specific training to help them in this direct work with children.

Children are provided with many opportunities to express their views, and things change as a result of corporate consultation and participation exercises. An adopted young person contributes to the preparation training for adopters, and looked after children are involved in mandatory 'corporate parent' training. It is not evident that children's views and wishes on adoption are fully integrated into all aspects of their care planning however which means that some of their expressed needs may be overlooked.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Children enjoy favourable outcomes because, in general, there is effective management of the service. They benefit from effective joint working between staff within the department and their colleagues in other agencies. One stakeholder noted that, 'effective partnership working is a strength of the service'. Staff report that they are very well supported and that an 'enormous investment' has been made in training.

Other improvements highlighted by staff include the better use of twin-tracking, earlier assessment of siblings, more information about children being gathered, continuity in staffing and opportunities for adopters to practice and learn parenting skills. This enables children, their families and their adoptive families to receive interventions that are based on the most up-to-date research and practice.

Children thrive in their adoptive placements because they are successfully placed with adopters who are suitably prepared, assessed and supported by experienced and skilled social workers. The majority of adopters contacted or surveyed found the preparation process very helpful in enabling them to understand the needs of their children. For example, one adopter noted that: 'overall we had a very positive experience. All staff involved were helpful and kept us informed'.

Adopters also noted that meeting with birth parents as part of the preparation course was 'very helpful.' One adopter noted that: 'at our preparation workshop we heard first hand from a birth mother which really added to our understanding'. Another commented that the preparation training, 'had content that we remember to this day.'

Other adopters and stakeholders have mixed views however of the content of preparation courses provided and the length of time taken to be assessed. For example, one adopter noted that; 'it felt very long at times and seemed to be going over the same ground again and again which was quite frustrating. We sometimes felt the preparation lacked focus'.

Another adopter suggested the service 'speed up the process of preparation and approval. To be under scrutiny for such a lengthy period of time is demoralising and very wearing - it made us question whether we were doing the right thing more than once'. One stakeholder suggested that one thing the service could do better was to 'improve the assessment of adopters'. Undue delay of this kind impacts on how long children have to wait to be placed.

The majority of children spend very little time waiting for their 'forever' families because the agency's recruitment strategy is successful in many respects. Recruitment is not always focussed enough however to ensure that all children achieve permanence within reasonable timescales. Some adopters report feeling under pressure to take children that would not be an appropriate match.

For example one adopter asked that the agency: 'Do not offer us details of children who do not match the criteria we were approved to adopt.' Another said: 'Throughout the process we expressed our wish to adopt a young child and at times felt this was not in line with the department's wishes and it would be preferable if we would consider an older child'.

Auditing and quality assurance systems are in place but are not robust enough to ensure quality performance in all areas. This limits opportunities to drive forward improvement for the benefit of children and young people. For example, there is a lack of any formal mechanism for alerting the adoption service early enough to the number of children requiring adoptive placements. Some care plans are changed for children who are proving hard to place, sometimes at the request of children themselves. There is no systematic monitoring however of children who are drifting out of timescales or for whom permanence through adoption is no longer appropriate.

Children's records are stored securely. Progress has been made since the last inspection in improving life story work and life appreciation days. The quality of child permanence reports remains variable however. Although the majority of these reports provide sufficient information to enable suitable matching, they are not written in a manner which will be most useful to children later in life and sometimes lack some key information. This was a recommendation at the last inspection that has not yet been met.

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 children's views, wishes and feelings are taken into account in all aspects of their care (NMS1)
- implement an effective strategy to recruit and assess prospective adopters who can meet most of the needs of those children for whom adoption is the plan. The agency monitors and evaluates the success of the strategy (NMS 10.1)
- ensure the adoption panel makes a written record of the reasons for its recommendations (breach of Regulation 5 (3)) (NMS 17.10))
- implement clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the agency. Regularly monitor all records kept by the agency to ensure compliance with the agency's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Take immediate action to address any issues raised by this monitoring (NMS 25.1-2)
- obtain the information about the child which is specified in Part 1 of Schedule 1. (Breach of Regulation 15)(NMS 27)