

Adoption and Permanence Team

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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Inspector	Rosemary Chapman / Rossella Volpi
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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 which carries out all the statutory functions required by legislation. The duties it undertakes are as follows: the recruitment, preparation assessment and approval of adopters, both domestic and intercountry; the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters; the support of adoption placements; post-adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, including birth records counselling and intermediary work; and support to birth parents of children placed for adoption, or who have been adopted.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The agency provides a good adoption service to children and families, with many strengths. These include very good systems for preventing delay and ensuring children are placed promptly with families who can meet their assessed needs and keep them safe. There is a rigorous approach to the preparation, assessment and approval of adopters. Support is well considered and children enjoy and achieve in stable families. Children's wishes and feelings are explored through direct work, and robust contact arrangements with birth families enable them to understand and maintain their heritage. Adult adoptees and their birth relatives receive a prompt and sensitive service.

The agency is very well managed, and committed, experienced and knowledgeable staff are supported by regular and effective supervision and access to training. Adopters commented that social workers are, 'very well organised, knowledgeable and very supportive'. Good monitoring arrangements and reliable administrative support ensure that the service continues to be of a good quality. There are good working arrangements between different teams in the local authority to provide an integrated approach to the delivery of the adoption service.

The main areas of weakness include inconsistent assessments of whether siblings should be placed together, delay in the completion of life story books, and a reactive approach to the support of birth parents. Although training is generally accessible, field social workers have limited access to specialist adoption training, panel processes in relation to consideration of siblings are not as robust as they could be and the children's guides, although child friendly and informative, lack some required details. The agency has recognised these weaknesses and has plans in place to address them.

Improvements since the last inspection

Two requirements and five recommendations were raised at the previous inspection. These related to: promoting equality and diversity; having a policy regarding historical abuse; the timing of the application to adopt; viewing Criminal Records Bureau disclosures; support to birth families; file audits; and joint training for panel members and staff. All of these have been addressed to provide a more robust service to children and families. However, support to birth families, although improved, still requires further attention, and a recommendation has been set following this inspection, to that effect.

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 a clear focus on safeguarding children in its widest sense and this forms a significant part of the assessment process. Robust, competency-based assessments keep children safe by placing them with appropriately prepared and assessed adoptive parents. Adopters are very well prepared for the task of parenting an adopted child and understand safeguarding issues, including safe care, internet security, contact issues and health and safety.

Children's health is promoted well and they access all the appropriate services to meet their health needs. There is very good access to the agency's medical adviser, who is very thorough and child focused. She provides advice and information to the agency, the social workers and meets with adopters so they understand the implications of any medical issues and can access appropriate resources. Adopters are assessed in terms of their abilities to promote a healthy lifestyle, and support plans identify any health needs and how these will be met. They are given very clear guidance about the areas in which they can exercise parental responsibility to prevent delay in accessing appropriate help.

There are very thorough, formal and well considered arrangements for matching which ensure children are placed with adopters who can meet most, if not all, of their assessed needs. However, the assessments of whether siblings should be placed together or apart are not universally robust; some are very well thought out but others are not formally considered or recorded. There are also very good arrangements to prevent drift, through the use of adoption social workers linking with children by the time of the second review, if adoption is being considered. The adoption manager has good oversight of this because of the systematic approach taken; he is therefore aware of the needs of children who may require an adoptive family and also monitors timescales. Over 90% of children have been placed within

12 months of the decision to be placed for adoption and there is a good use of the National Adoption Register and the consortium when in-house placements are not available.

Prospective adopters receive full information about any proposed placements and are guided by their social worker to fully consider the implications for them, and whether they can realistically meet the child's needs. The social workers are also very good at following up other agencies to provide information when an interagency placement is being pursued. Placement planning and arrangements for introductions are thorough and prospective adopters provide the child with an appropriately child-focused book about their prospective family so they know what to expect.

The agency has limited involvement with intercountry adoptions. However, when these occur, they are dealt with by appropriately skilled, experienced and knowledgeable staff who are guided by clear procedures to provide an effective and safe service.

The agency has a robust understanding of its responsibilities in relation to handling allegations. Staff are appropriately trained in safeguarding issues, including administrative staff, and have easy access to the policy and appropriate procedures, which include dealing with historical abuse.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency has a considered, strategic and thorough approach to preparing and supporting adoptive parents; this enables them to care for their children in a way which encourages them to enjoy and achieve. The preparation course, together with the home study, ensure adoptive parents have a good understanding of why children may behave in certain ways, and equips them with appropriate strategies to manage this appropriately. To quote an adopter: 'The staff are knowledgeable about approaches and strategies to meet the needs at the time.' As a result, children develop positive relationships with their adoptive parents and other people.

The competency-based assessment framework ensures adoptive parents are aware of the sorts of activities children may like to engage in, and their knowledge of local leisure facilities. Children are supported to become more confident through taking part in activities and developing their leisure interests and hobbies. There are many examples of children exploring their interests in music, sport and creative pursuits, attending out-of-school activities, having friends over to play, being invited to birthday parties and other usual childhood activities.

The agency has a strong and strategic approach to supporting adoptive children to achieve educationally. There is a new virtual headteacher for looked after children and the education policy is being developed so that any children who have previously been looked after, including adopted children, are able to benefit from these arrangements. Adopters are supported in the admissions process so that their

children are accepted in their preferred school. The post adoption team is actively working with schools to increase their awareness of the needs of adopted children. For example, there is a useful information leaflet for teachers, they have undertaken training on attachment for the special educational needs coordinators, and they have good working relationships with the educational psychologist. They also support families directly, for example attending a meeting at a school. These strategies provide a coordinated and supportive approach to enabling adoptive children to receive support to achieve their educational potential from informed professionals who understand their needs.

Children live in suitable and safe homes with their adoptive parents. Suitability and safety of accommodation are assessed during the home study and adopters are given good information about health and safety in the home.

Adoptive families are made aware of the agency's responsibility to provide effective support at an early stage, through the preparation training and the pre-panel visit which is undertaken by the adoption support services adviser (ASSA). Potential support needs are assessed at an early stage; the ASSA sees all the proposed plans so she can assess the suitability of the proposed arrangements and highlight and address any missing areas. A social worker completes an assessment when families contact the agency later on, which then informs the plan of support.

The agency uses a variety of means to support adoptive families effectively so that children remain in stable families who can meet their needs. These include service level agreements with two adoption support agencies, which offer support groups, newsletters, access to advice, peer support, and therapeutic work. It also funds an agency to provide a nursery for adopted children under five years of age on a fortnightly basis, which has the added advantage of access to a play and filial therapist who can provide extra support if needed. The team has access to two social workers who undertake direct work with children, for example, re-looking at life story work and identity issues, which is a really useful resource. The team also does direct work with families, arranges short-breaks or day care where appropriate, provides two social events a year and signposts to other agencies. There are good links with health, education and the child and adolescent mental health services. Adopters express a high level of satisfaction with post-adoption support: 'The team has always been very supportive offering advice where needed. Referrals to other agencies have been prompt and chased up.' The social workers are spoken of in glowing terms, such as 'excellent', 'highly skilled and professional', and, 'always on the end of the phone'. One adopter commented: 'I don't think I would have come this far without them', and another said, 'the support has been consistent and of a high standard.'

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

A real strength of the agency is the work it does to elicit the views, wishes and feelings of children. The agency has two social workers who undertake direct work with children, and examples of some very good pieces of work demonstrate the

effectiveness of this. As these workers are independent of the child's social worker, this adds a layer of independence to the process.

The direct workers are also used to help children understand their life story, either before they are placed for adoption or if they need this input at a later stage. This is done very effectively, with written information to underpin the work. This helps children understand their history and their current situation. However, there are also some weaknesses in this area. Although field social workers understand the importance of life story work, the subsequent life story book and later life letter, the life story books are not always completed in a timely way. This means that adopters and children do not have access to the tools to help them understand their backgrounds and move forwards.

The agency is very supportive of contact between an adopted child and their birth family where this is in the child's interests. They are actively involved in a significant number of direct contact arrangements, some of which are with birth parents, but mainly with siblings. Indirect contact arrangements are robust and well managed, with prompt exchanges of information. Birth parents receive practical help in writing letters to make these arrangements more effective and a birth parent described her worker as 'brilliant'. The potential for unauthorised contact is explored and adopters made aware of safeguards. The agency has devised a very helpful leaflet, has put on training and addresses this in the preparation course. Adoptive families demonstrate a very positive attitude towards contact with the birth family. They engage with one-off meetings with birth parents, comply with contact arrangements and understand the importance of these for the child. Any difficulties are picked up and addressed by the post adoption team.

The agency demonstrates a respectful attitude towards birth parents and is committed to involving them in planning for their child and eliciting their views. They try to obtain as much information as they can for the child permanence report, the document a child will access when they are older. These reports are variable in quality; however, they are improving, and are monitored by the managers and the adoption panel to ensure they are of at least a satisfactory standard. The agency gives birth parents a useful leaflet explaining adoption, how to access advice and the availability of independent support. However, although this aspect has improved since the previous inspection, it is still an area of weakness, with very poor take up.

The work undertaken with adult adoptees and their birth families, including contact and reunion work, is very sensitively and thoughtfully completed, and with no delay. Feedback from adoptees and birth families is very positive, describing workers as, 'very helpful, supportive and understanding', and saying, 'I cannot fault anything'.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Medway's recruitment strategy recognises that most children from Medway need to be placed outside of their local area, because of its small size. However, it works well with the local consortium and most children are placed through those arrangements, although interagency placements are used if they are the best way of meeting a child's needs. The agency has an inclusive approach to recruitment and welcomes all applicants who can meet the needs of adoptive children.

The preparation, assessment and approval processes are thorough and generally carried out in a timely way, with any delays closely monitored. Adopters have commented: 'I learnt a lot from the group, especially looking at the whole process from the point of view of the child'; 'preparation groups were very thorough and allowed me to hear arguments that made me more open to concepts like contact'; and, 'I was kept up to date throughout and fully understood the process'. A separate day which concentrates on loss is held prior to the preparation groups and is a useful and innovative way of addressing this issue which is common to most applicants, to help them assess whether they are able to move on at this stage. Assessments are thorough, use attachment style interview techniques, and have a second opinion visit as standard practice. This adds further robustness to the process. Applicants who wish to make an intercountry application have their preparation training from another agency and an experienced independent social worker usually completes their assessment.

The panel is efficiently administered which ensures members have the paperwork in good time to give it their full consideration. The membership is diverse, with a good range of personal and professional experience to give a balanced view to the recommendation. The panel meets regularly to prevent delay, and members are very welcoming to prospective adopters who attend. The minutes give a good and accurate record of the meeting, which will then form a useful part of the child's adoption file and information for the future. However, siblings are not formally considered separately, nor is a separate minute kept for each child. This may lead a child to think their own individual needs were not given due consideration in this important part of the adoption process. The agency decision maker makes a timely and considered decision based on full information and this is communicated to the relevant people orally and in writing.

Children, service users and staff are clear about the aims and objectives of the agency and the facilities and services it provides. The Statement of Purpose is clear, can be translated into other languages and is readily available. The children's guides to adoption and adoption support are very child friendly and informative; however, they lack details of how to contact the independent reviewing officer, and the guide to adoption support does not give details of how to contact the Children's Rights Director and independent advocacy.

The managers of the agency are suitable people to work with children and are

appropriately skilled, knowledgeable and experienced to deliver an efficient and effective adoption service. Likewise, the staff and members of the central list are suitably recruited and selected so that they are safe and appropriate to work with children and service users.

The staff are committed, enthusiastic, experienced, skilled, knowledgeable, appropriately qualified and child focused to ensure they provide a service of good quality. This is enhanced by good access to training, although the fieldwork social workers have limited access to specialist training in adoption issues such as life story work, which may hinder their practice. Staff are further supported in their roles by access to good support and effective supervision, including an annual appraisal of their training needs. Staff are reflective and keen to use evidence from up-to-date research to improve their practice.

The agency is very well managed, both strategically and operationally. Senior managers are approachable and operate a policy whereby anyone can make an appointment to see them to discuss any issues. There are good monitoring arrangements, both internally and by the executive. Staff are clear about their roles and responsibilities, administrative support is excellent and everyone works well together to provide an integrated adoption service of high quality.

Records are clear, accurate, up to date and stored securely. Children's adoption files are well maintained to provide a very good record to aid understanding of the decision making process in later life. Files are audited and contain evidence of case supervision for further accountability.

The premises are appropriate and enable the agency to fulfil its obligations as outlined in the Statement of Purpose. They are secure, and have rooms available for meetings and interviews.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Inclusivity is reflected in the written documents, including policy and procedural guidance and information for service users. This is implemented in practice; prospective adopters are welcomed and assessed in terms of their ability to parent an adoptive child, rather than any preconceived or stereotypical ideas. Children's needs, including those in relation to religion and culture, are assessed very well and on an individual basis and they are placed with adopters who can meet those needs.

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 placement decisions on two or more children from the same family are based on a comprehensive assessment of the quality of the children's relationship, their individual needs and the likely capacity of the prospective

adopter to meet the needs of the siblings being placed together (Adoption and Children Act 2002 Statutory Guidance Chapter 4 (12))

- ensure the stages of the life story book are completed in a timely way; at the latest by the second statutory review of the child's placement with the prospective adopters, and the completed life story book at the latest within ten working days of the adoption order (NMS 2.7)
- ensure birth parents are actively encouraged to use a support worker, who is independent of the child's social worker, from the time adoption is identified as the plan for the child (NMS 12.3)
- ensure the adoption panel makes a considered recommendation in respect of each individual child, as to whether the child should be placed for adoption and then placed with a particular adopter, and that the minutes reflect this recommendation (NMS 17.6, 17.8 and 17.10)
- ensure the children's guide to adoption contains details of how a child can contact their independent reviewing officer, and the children's guide to adoption support contains details of how to contact the Children's Rights Director and independent advocacy (NMS 18.5 and 6)
- ensure fieldwork staff have access to relevant adoption training to equip them with the skills required to meet the needs of children. (NMS 23.1)