

Staffordshire County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Sean White / Stella Henderson
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Date of last inspection	08/01/2007

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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 agency that undertakes, or makes arrangements for, all statutory adoption responsibilities; most work is undertaken in house with little contracting out for services. The service recruits, prepares and assesses potential adopters, arranges the matching and placement of children and provides support services for people affected by adoption. It operates from various locations in the county.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced, key inspection. This is an agency that takes seriously its responsibilities for children placed for adoption. It has a good approach to recruiting only the most suitable people to be adopters and takes great care when matching children with families. There is a very low disruption rate.

It has a strong approach to supporting placements, is very responsive and sensitive to their needs. Life story work is a strong and evolving aspect of the service. Post-adoption support and assistance to adopted adults is a developing aspect of the service, which has yet to grow into full operational success; this is also the case with birth parents. Nevertheless, the agency demonstrated a strong strategic direction that is clearly focused on meeting the needs of all people affected by adoption.

The service is managed well at all levels and workers demonstrate significant knowledge and skill. Work undertaken and operational systems are good in most areas with some examples of excellent outcomes.

Improvements since the last inspection

This is the first inspection of this service by Ofsted.

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.

This is an agency that takes seriously its responsibilities for children where adoption is the plan. It has a clear strategic and operational direction which ensures that children's safety and well-being are at the forefront of its activities.

The agency's approach to recruiting adopters is based upon meeting the wide range of complex and varied needs of children who require placements. There is a careful and thorough screening process that ensures only the most suitable people are accepted for preparation and assessment. This provides the service with families that can be successfully matched with children. The low disruption rate in recent times demonstrates the success of the recruitment and matching strategies of the service.

Applicants who are accepted as prospective adopters are subject to a detailed and comprehensive preparation and assessment process. The analysis of applicants' suitability, motivation and competence is thorough and includes detailed examination of their circumstances. Prospective adopters reports are written to a high standard and there is a rigorous approach to checks and references being undertaken.

The adoption panel brings due scrutiny to the work placed before it. It is chaired by an experienced professional who encourages detailed analysis of reports and information. There is a clear focus on the best possible outcomes for children demonstrated by commitment and a conscientious approach. Sound recommendations are made supported by good minutes of proceedings that give the agency decision maker full details upon which informed decisions are made. The management of the panel, however, is not fully focused; this leads to avoidable over-running which creates unnecessary frustration and tension for people who are waiting for cases to be heard.

Rigorous staff recruitment practices ensure only the most suitable managers and workers are employed. All are suitably qualified and there is a high proportion of staff with post-qualification awards. Workers and managers demonstrated high levels of knowledge and understanding of contemporary adoption issues and demonstrate strong commitment and motivation.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency's approach to supporting and maintaining placements is a very strong aspect of the services provided. There is a clear and focused commitment to working with all agencies and colleagues to ensure that placements are strong, and effectively established. This provides a positive and optimistic framework within which families feel enabled and encouraged.

There are responsive specialist services available to the agency. These provide

significant input into enabling the agency to manage complex and challenging situations; families are very complimentary about the levels and quality of support they receive.

Although in-house post adoption support is a recent arrangement, and a developing part of the agency, there is a clear strategic direction. There is a strong commitment to involvement with families throughout the adoption process and early engagement with adopters, colleagues from other services and partner agencies being a demonstrably positive direction.

There are challenges, however, that the agency is facing. For instance, adopted adults wishing to access their birth records face a considerable wait and other service provision has to be prioritised. Nevertheless, increased staffing and new management arrangements demonstrated positive and conscientious commitment to developing and improving this aspect of the agency's responsibilities.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency has a clear commitment to working with birth parents and values their contribution to, and participation in, the planning for their children's futures. There is also a clear commitment to involving children if they are of an age and level of understanding.

The service has a strong understanding of the importance of children's histories and birth family backgrounds. Child permanence reports include significant information and there is an effective gatekeeping mechanism in place to ensure details are full and relevant.

Life-story work is managed to a good standard and it is clear that the agency is fully committed to producing quality material that can assist in the progression of children's placements and futures. Direct work, a life-story forum and trained personnel ensure that this essential aspect of the service's responsibilities is focused and child centred. There are some issues of timeliness that the agency is working towards improving, but the quality of the work is of a good and improving standard.

Birth parents are provided with access to independent support; this is provided in-house. Although this is a developing aspect of the agency's work, with a clear strategic plan, services are yet to be fully operational.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency is managed to a good standard at all levels and demonstrates that its activities and strategic direction are clearly aimed at the best possible outcomes for children. Recent strengthening of the management team provides the service with a strong, well-qualified leadership.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Workers have a clear grasp of anti-discriminatory practice, placements are made with full consideration of the individual and complex needs of children and there is a strong underpinning infrastructure that welcomes and promotes difference.

Managers are suitably qualified and demonstrate a clear understanding of contemporary adoption issues and legislation. They have regular, formal contact with other managers across children's services and ensure that arrangements and strategies for children requiring adoptive placements are effective and implemented.

The structure of the agency is clear; management arrangements, lines of responsibility and accountability are well established with arrangements in place to deputise for absent managers. Allocation and workload monitoring is fair and operationally effective. Workers are encouraged and enabled to undertake their duties to the best of their abilities and there is an enthusiastic and committed approach across the board. Support, supervision and quality control are strong aspects of the service's operations. There is a similar strength in the operational relationships across children's services which ensures that children's cases are moved forward effectively and placements made in a timely way. The agency is carefully monitored by both the executive and senior management.

The staff have access to good quality, relevant training and there is a high proportion of workers with post-qualifying awards. The staffing establishment, whilst adequate, is working to full capacity with little, if any, facility for expansion.

The organisation and administration of the service are good with effective systems and structures in place. Case recording, access to information and the monitoring of records is good and, in the main, carefully undertaken. Some records, however, were not of the high standard of most. Staff and panel members' records include all required information and are maintained to a good standard.

There are several premises throughout the county where the adoption service is located. Some of these are not of the best quality and are not fit for their purpose, although there are plans in place to relocate some workers to improved premises in the very near future. There is, nevertheless, effective security in place, and a disaster recovery plan protects essential information.

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 panel is managed and conducted efficiently (NMS 12.1)