

# Peterborough City Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA 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

Peterborough City Council's adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities relating to adoption. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters. The council commissions a similar service from a voluntary adoption agency for those wishing to adopt from overseas.

The service carries out the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters and supports adoptive placements. It also provides post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, including the maintenance of an adoption letterbox, birth records counselling and intermediary work. An independent counselling and support service is provided to birth parents through commissioning arrangements with a voluntary adoption agency.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This was an announced key inspection of the adoption service. The purpose of the inspection was to assess its compliance with the adoption national minimum standards. All the standards were inspected under the outcome areas of staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and organisation. The adoption service's promotion of equality and diversity was also inspected.

This adoption service has faced difficulties over the last two years arising from an increased number of children requiring adoptive families and from insufficiently developed management arrangements and low staffing levels within the adoption team. The team is now almost fully staffed and management arrangements are now effective. This has led to significant improvements in the service provided. Although the impact of these changes is yet to be fully embedded, this is now a satisfactory service that provides good outcomes for children in some key areas.

The service provides prospective adopters with good information and training. It undertakes careful and robust assessments of their suitability to adopt. Social workers identify and set out children's needs well and adopters receive very good information about children they are going to adopt. The authority has a very effective panel which provides strong oversight of the professional practice of the adoption service as well as making clear, well-considered recommendations. Decision making is prompt and careful. As a consequence, children who require adoption are matched with families who are suitable and well prepared to meet their needs. The authority's children's guide is not produced in a suitable style for all children for whom adoption is the plan. Although assessments of prospective adopters are rigorously carried out the procedures for staff recruitment and records, while

generally sound, are not fully robust in every case.

Planning arrangements within the authority are improving. This means that contingency plans for adoption are now being developed earlier and in a more consistent manner. Communication between children's social work teams and the adoption team is also more effective than it was previously. Better information about the needs of children who may require adoptive families is beginning to inform the adoptive parent recruitment strategy. The adoption service is working to improve its quality assurance procedures but these are not yet sufficiently well developed.

The authority has worked hard to reduce a large backlog of life story books that were not completed for adopted children, although there are still a number of children who have not yet received their books. The authority continues to address this matter and has put plans in place to ensure that children being adopted now receive a life story book in a timely manner. However, the implementation of these plans is at an early stage so their impact cannot yet be fully assessed.

Individual children and adoptive families are provided with a range of support services. Similarly, people requiring post adoption support are provided with a service that aims to meet their needs. However, support services are not yet sufficiently well underpinned by detailed assessment and review. Additionally, services are not provided in a sufficiently cohesive or integrated manner and some are not fully established. The authority works hard to support the birth parents of children being adopted.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

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

The authority was instructed to ensure its Statement of Purpose and children's guide contained all required information. It was recommended that children's assessment reports and the decision making process for sibling groups were improved. It was also recommended that another element of decision making was improved and that birth parents were informed about and encouraged to access support services. The adoption service has addressed all these matters.

The authority was asked to improve its arrangements for life story work for children being adopted and to ensure that support services were closely monitored. It was also asked to ensure that personnel files contained full and current information. These matters have been partially addressed but new recommendations have been made regarding related matters.

### **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 service has an adoptive parent recruitment strategy. This is being developed further and is beginning to benefit from more cohesive information systems within the authority. These are beginning to identify, more clearly, the sorts of people needed to meet the needs of children who may require adoptive families. The suitability of people to adopt is considered on an inclusive basis irrespective of their race, sexuality, disability or marital status.

The preparation, training and assessment of prospective adopters are undertaken with care, thoroughness and attention to detail. There has been some delay for applicants at differing stages of the process because of previously low staffing levels in the adoption team. This has been addressed and more recent assessments are undertaken in a more efficient and timely manner. Thorough checks on the suitability and competence of prospective adopters take place and prospective adopters are well prepared to meet the needs of children requiring families. Assessment reports are well written, evaluative and reflect the process that adopters have undertaken. This provides the adoption panel with the necessary information on which to make its recommendations on the suitability of applicants.

Adoption and field social work staff liaise effectively to find adoptive families and arrange matches between children and adopters. Recent developments within the authority mean that these arrangements are now being more consistently managed. A great deal of work has been done to address some historic problems that led to delay for some children. This work has had some success and placements are now being made in a generally timely manner. Matches are carefully made and considered and the process for recording the matching processes are now more effective than previously. The authority works closely with the local adoption consortium to find adoptive parents for children for whom there are no appropriate adopters locally. It refers to the adoption register as necessary. This careful preparation and matching result in a strong record of successful adoptions.

The authority will not make decisions about whether a child should be placed for adoption or matched with prospective adopters without full information. Child permanence reports are generally of good quality. Information in these documents is generally, but not always, recorded in an appropriately accessible manner for consideration by children in later life. Prospective adopters receive full and comprehensive information about the children they are considering adopting. The adoption panel is correctly constituted and well managed and chaired. It undertakes its responsibilities with commitment and rigour. It is thorough in its consideration of reports submitted and makes clear recommendations with the reasons for these explicitly recorded. The panel also monitors practice standards to ensure that any work required is undertaken correctly. Arrangements are in place to provide the adoption service with feedback about the quality of work presented to panel. This is currently provided on a case-by-case basis and does not yet provide the authority

with summary information regarding strengths or areas for development. The administration of the panel enables business to be conducted in a timely way. Decision making is prompt and shows a thoroughness which ensures children have the most suitable placements in adoptive families.

The authority's staff recruitment procedures are generally satisfactory. However, the authority does not, in every case, ensure it seeks a reference from an applicant's most recent employer. This means that in some cases the reason why an applicant left their last post is not identified. The managers and staff of the agency are all suitably experienced and provide sound operational leadership and practice. Adoption staff understand adoption and social work with children and clearly focus on promoting the well-being of children.

### **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is satisfactory.

The service has ready access to specialist advice and information. Medical advice and support provided to the agency are of excellent quality and available to inform all areas of adoption decision making. Legal advice is always provided at panel. Panel benefits from good professional advice. Adopters and professionals have access to good support, advice and training from the medical adviser, an educational psychologist and the looked after children's psychologist.

The authority supports children and their adoptive families well during the adoption process. Introductions are well managed and controlled, and placements are well reviewed and supported in their early stages. Adoption placement reports are very effective in setting out children's needs, how they will be met and any additional support needed. They provide a strong basis for matching and the preliminary identification of any ongoing support needs. The service ensures that adoptive parents clearly understand their roles and commitments, and arrangements to delegate parental responsibility to prospective adopters are also clearly agreed and recorded. Adopters are particularly well prepared in matters such as the importance of retaining children's names and heritage, openness about adoption and their commitment to contact arrangements.

The authority has a range of services that are able to provide adoption support. However, these are not all fully and permanently embedded within the authority's structure. This means that, although the service provides a range of flexible and individually tailored support strategies to help adopted children to settle into their new families and cope with difficulties they may experience, these are not always cohesively managed and coordinated.

Similarly post adoption support is provided to meet all requests but the authority cannot be certain that it will continue to be able to provide all services that are currently in place. For example, the authority's multi-systemic therapy and looked after children psychology teams are operating as pilots, and as such their future cannot yet be assured. Additionally, post adoption support needs are not always

based on clear, detailed and comprehensive assessments. As such the process of identifying and meeting needs and monitoring outcomes is not sufficiently well developed.

The letterbox arrangements for maintaining contact between adopted children and their birth families are managed effectively. Birth parents receive very good support to write letters and to maintain contact with their children who were adopted. This helps children to understand their histories and heritage.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is satisfactory.

The service recognises the significance of children's backgrounds and histories and their importance in assisting children to understand themselves and their place in the world. Throughout the adoption process the service works with birth parents to encourage and enable them to be involved in, and contribute to, the planning for their children's futures. Birth parents are also encouraged and assisted to provide information about themselves and their families to help adopted children understand their backgrounds. They are encouraged and assisted to maintain contact in line with the contact agreement.

The adoption service provides the birth parents of adopted children with support. This is provided by children's social workers as part of their everyday work. Letterbox workers provide very good support to help birth parents write appropriate letters to, and receive letters from, their children who have been adopted. More formal support arrangements are provided through an independent service contracted by the authority. This helps to ensure that birth parents still receive support during parts of the adoption process that are difficult and distressing for them.

The agency regards life story work for children being adopted as important. It has clear arrangements setting out how good quality work is to be managed in a timely manner. However, historic staffing and management difficulties within the service have led to there being a large number of children adopted who do not yet have their life story books. This means that these children and their adopters have not had the help they may need to make sense of their history in a sufficiently timely manner. The authority has been working hard to address this and, commendably, has reduced the backlog significantly. However, a number of children who have been adopted for some time do not yet have their books and the new arrangements for completing this work have not been in place long enough for their impact to be evaluated. Later life letters are of variable quality and a significant number of these have not been written in a timely manner. However, some very good letters are produced for children to refer to in later life. Child permanence reports contain good information about children's backgrounds and family circumstances that is generally presented in an accessible manner. This helps add to children's understanding of their past.



## Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

## Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service's practice focuses on valuing diversity and promoting equality. The service recruits adopters from a diverse range of backgrounds to meet the different needs of children who need adoptive families. Assessments of prospective adopters provide a thorough consideration of their ability to respect and promote diversity and to bring children up in a non-discriminatory manner. The service works hard to ensure that children are matched with adopters who are able to meet their needs and where possible reflect their background and heritage. Equality and diversity are promoted by the individualised nature of the agency's work, and the consideration given to ensuring that children's individual needs are met through adoption and the support provided to their birth parents.

The organisation has a Statement of Purpose in place which sets out the service it provides. It is reviewed and updated on an annual basis and is signed off by the authority's councillors. The children's guide is made available to children for whom adoption is the plan. However, this document is produced in one format only and as such is not suitable or accessible for all children.

The agency recruits adopters who are suitable to meet the needs of children requiring families. Arrangements to provide the adoption team with information about the needs of children waiting or for whom adoption may be the plan have recently been made more structured and more formalised. This information is used to inform the recruitment strategy and to help the adoption service to prioritise adopters who can best meet the needs of the children needing families. However, these more formalised arrangements are too new for their impact to be assessed. The service responds to enquiries promptly and provides good information and counselling for prospective adopters.

The management of the adoption service, at both operational and strategic levels, is effective. Current management arrangements are relatively new and follow a significantly lengthy time of interim arrangements and staff shortages within the adoption team. Management of the service is focused on delivering positive outcomes for children through adoption. Managers understand how adoption fits into the overall context of children's social care, and the management and support for staff are of good quality. This has enabled the authority to address a number of difficulties it had in relation to adoption and to provide a sound basis for future development. However, the service is still hampered by some work that remains undone, delayed or underdeveloped. The service is aware of this and has plans to

continue to address this work. Effective workload management ensures that the key functions of the adoption service are prioritised to minimise delay for children. This has allowed the service to ensure its more recent work is of good and timely quality, while at the same time dealing with some of the historic problems. The service provides its staff with very good support. Training and development opportunities for staff are appropriate, with access to both internal and external training courses. Staff members are professional, committed to their roles, and work enthusiastically to meet children's needs.

The authority and adoption service have begun to develop more formalised and structured quality monitoring and assurance procedures. However, these are in their early stages and, at this time, are not sufficient to ensure that the adoption service is fully effective in providing good outcomes for children.

Case recording supports the work done with children and adopters. Records are largely held electronically and generally support the work done and decisions made. The authority plans to change to a new electronic recording and information management system having identified weaknesses in the one used currently. Effective arrangements exist to ensure that any records relating to children's adoption are maintained with appropriate confidentiality.

Records of the staff recruitment process and the workers employed do not always contain all the required information. The agency operates from suitable premises with appropriate storage arrangements in place. Archived files are stored securely and a risk assessment is in place to monitor these arrangements.

## **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 recruitment and selection procedures for appointing staff follow good practice in safeguarding children and young people. Specifically, that references are sought from the person's most recent employer (NMS 19.2) (Breach of Regulation 11(3) of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003)
- ensure that people affected by adoption receive a service that is appropriate and tailored to their particular need (NMS 33.1)
- ensure that arrangements for children to obtain clear and appropriate information about themselves and their life before adoption are effective. Specifically that later in life letters, life story work and books are completed in a timely manner for all children and are of a consistently good quality (NMS 8.2)
- ensure the children's guide is suitable for all children for whom adoption is the plan (NMS 1.4)

- ensure that procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the adoption agency and ensuring quality performance are effective (NMS 17.1)
- ensure that up-to-date, comprehensive personnel files are maintained for each member of staff. Specifically, that records are kept of all matters in NMS 28.2. (NMS 28.1)