

North Tyneside Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Sean White
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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

The agency undertakes all statutory duties in relation to the adoption of children. This includes the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of prospective adopters, matching and placing of children with families, and adoption support.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The agency has a committed approach to ensuring that children who have been placed for adoption have the best possible opportunities for being placed with suitable families that can meet their needs. This is achieved by using a thorough approach to preparing and assessing adopters and a sound working relationship between children's social workers and the adoption team when matching children with families. The children's guides in particular demonstrate this commitment.

The agency is well managed and experienced, knowledgeable staff are supported, encouraged and trained in a way that promotes good practice and commitment.

Birth parents have good opportunities for support and are enabled and encouraged to be involved in the planning for their children and to contribute to the agencies commitment to life-story work.

Support for adopters following approval is not as consistent as other aspects of the agencies work.

Improvements since the last inspection

Following the last inspection there were two actions and 14 recommendations made. The agency has worked hard to address these and has made improvements in most areas.

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 sound approach to ensuring that children are matched with appropriate families. There are sufficient adopters recruited to meet the needs of children requiring placements and family finding provides social workers with a wide choice of approved families for them to consider. Although there is a written recruitment strategy in place, it is not particularly well focused on how adopters for children with more complex needs can be recruited. However, it was evident that the agency was able to approve sufficient adopters to meet the wide range of needs of children awaiting placement despite this.

Children's social workers work closely with the adoption service to effect appropriate matches. There is a monitoring meeting held every month to evaluate the situations of children requiring placement to avoid excessive waiting and 'drift'. There are clear arrangements for ensuring that adopters receive all relevant information about the children they are considering adopting. Children's permanence reports, whilst generally well written, have too much extraneous detail and do not take into consideration the wide readership of these reports.

There is a very thorough approach to the preparation and assessment of prospective adopters. Preparation groups have been recently extended and there is an active approach to evaluating their effectiveness in meeting prospective adopters' needs. Assessment reports are well presented, and analytical of the applicants' circumstances and capacity to be parents. The service ensures that all statutory checks are undertaken and it also pursues six referees, which exceeds the minimum required.

Although the practice has now ceased, until fairly recently the agency was approving adopters for specific, named children, which is not permitted under current legislation. This caused delay in one situation. The practice, which was mainly in respect of foster carers applying to adopt a child placed with them, was also not well coordinated. There is no clear policy or procedure for processing the applications of foster carers.

The adoption panel is suitably constituted and has a membership with appropriate skills and backgrounds, the chairperson has wide experience in children's social work and demonstrated skill in managing the panel and the business placed before it. The panel approaches its work diligently and with due thoroughness. It is also welcoming and sensitive to the people who attend. It sits at regular intervals and is able to manage the volume of business. Although, from time to time extra panels have to be convened. The panel did, however, exceed its duties and responsibilities somewhat by entering into casework discussion and offering advice and direction.

The administration of the panel is well organised and efficient. Papers are circulated in sufficient time for them to be read, and well written minutes are produced in a timely way.

The decision maker makes her judgement on the recommendations of the panel with due rigour and ensures that the quality of work that is presented to the panel is of a suitable quality. Decisions are made within timescales but the letter to approved adopters is sent from the agency manager, not the decision maker.

The adoption panel is directed by comprehensive policies and procedures. Some of the information, however, is not within the scope of current regulations and provides the wrong advice.

The manager and staff of the agency are well qualified, skilled and experienced. Recruitment practices are very good, with all necessary checks being sought and verification of references undertaken.

The staff team demonstrated significant understanding of adoption matters, the law surrounding adoption and best practice issues. All workers are involved in the practices of assessment, family finding and support and their collective and individual skills and experience bring a proficient and committed approach to their work.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is satisfactory.

This was the weakest area of the service. Adoption support is a developing area of the agency's operations and has yet to establish a fully coordinated approach to providing all the approved adopters, with or without children in placement, with a comprehensive support service. Post adoption support is, similarly, an aspect of the service's operations that has yet to establish a coherent strategic and operational direction. The agency has, however, a service level agreement with an Adoption Support Agency (ASA) that has provided appropriate services to those families and individuals who have been referred.

Although many people had received a good support service from the agency, there were instances where the support had been poorly coordinated and confused, leaving some adopters frustrated and angry.

The agency has access to specialist advice to assist in the support strategies. This includes a committed and respected medical advisor and a member of the panel who is a specialist in children's mental health. The legal advice available to the agency is generally sound, although the practice of approving adopters for specific children, outlined in the previous section, was identified as inappropriate.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency ensures that birth parents are provided with the opportunity to have access to support that is independent of their child's social worker. This support is

available either from within the adoption team, or from an independent Adoption Support Agency (ASA). Children's social workers work closely with the adoption team to develop an understanding of children's situations and the involvement in planning that birth parents are encouraged to contribute to. This manifests itself in coherent planning and cooperation, so far as is possible in contentious situations, with birth parents. This includes the gathering of information as part of life-story work and preparation for adoption.

Life story work and direct work with children to prepare them for adoption has a high profile in this agency and is undertaken with enthusiasm and vigour. Foster carers and the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) are all involved in the process alongside the adoption service and the children's social workers.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency's operations, aims and objectives are clearly laid out in the Statement of Purpose, which is a well-written document that underpins the responsibilities of the service and informs the policies and procedures that govern it. The children's guides, one for older and one for younger children, are of an excellent quality. They are in glossy booklet form and are presented in a professional way that children can relate to and understand. Children are provided with these in a pack that includes crayons and felt-tip pens with which they can add to or colour in sections of the booklets. Considerable effort has gone into producing these.

The information pack that is provided to prospective applicants is comprehensive and includes all required information to assist people at the start of their adoption 'journey' and it is sent in a timely way to all enquirers.

The manager, who has been in post for less than a year, is well qualified and experienced in social work with children and in adoption. She was able to demonstrate the levels of knowledge and understanding necessary to carry out the management responsibilities of the post. There is a senior worker in the team who shares some management duties and deputises in the manager's absence. The management structure in the department has clear lines of accountability and communication and senior managers demonstrated understanding of and involvement in the adoption process.

The agency is managed efficiently and with due regard for the best outcomes for children. The allocation and management of workload is undertaken fairly and with

consideration given to the skills and interests of team members. Casework support and supervision is regular and organised in a formal way to encourage staff to undertake their duties to the best of their abilities.

There are clear guidelines in place for monitoring and controlling the agency. Quality control systems govern processes and outcomes and are generally of a good standard. However, the executive only receives an annual report on the work of the service and should receive two reports each year. Corporate parenting responsibilities within the council are undertaken seriously. An action plan for improvement is in place following recommendations made from the Joint Area Review (JAR). The quality management of case files was not consistent across the board and although audits are undertaken there are no records kept on the files.

The arrangements for administration are organised in an efficient way and the infrastructure of the agency is sound. However, there are barely sufficient administrative resources, which means that this aspect of the service is often 'stretched'.

Staff resources are much improved following a recent period where there were difficulties. Agency workers are still used from time to time but these arrangements are not as successful as the work that the permanent staff has undertaken.

Training is a high priority in this agency. All workers have access to a range of training and development opportunities and all take advantage of this. Relevant training and the gaining of Post Qualifying awards has enhanced the skill and knowledge base of the agency.

Case records are generally well maintained, and include all required information. They are appropriately indexed and information is easy to access. There are some inconsistencies, however, that have not been identified through the auditing system and in some instances there were no records of supervision decisions entered.

The files of staff members and panel members were of a very good standard overall with only minor omissions.

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):

- develop the written recruitment strategy into one that makes more explicit the recruitment needs of the agency and children requiring placement (NMS 2)
- produce a policy and procedure for recruiting adopters who are foster carers (NMS 4.5)

- develop a style of writing Children's Permanence Reports that is suitable to meet the needs of their wide readership (NMS 5)
- write the adoption panel procedures in a way that reflects current regulations (NMS 10.1)
- develop a more consistent approach to post approval support to adopters (NMS 6)
- provide the executive with a report on the work of the agency twice a year (NMS 17)
- record all casework supervision decisions on adopters case files (NMS 25.5)
- maintain audit records on case files (NMS 27.3).