

Northumberland County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Marian Denny
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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

Northumberland County Council operates a comprehensive adoption service which includes the recruitment, preparation, assessment and support of adopters for both domestic and inter country adoption. The pre and post-placement support of adopters, as well as the approval of non-agency adopters, is also provided.

In addition, the service assists field work staff in the assessment of children's needs, preparation of children for adoption, which includes undertaking life story work with the child, the production of relevant reports for court, the matching and placement of children with adoptive parents, support for children pre and post-placement and post adoption contact. The service also provides and maintains a post box scheme that supports information exchange in adoption placements.

An independent counselling and support service is provided to birth parents, their families and adopted adults through a service level agreement with an adoption support agency. In addition, a birth records counselling and support service is provided to adopted adults.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This announced interim inspection looked at the progress the service has made with the requirements and recommendations from the last full inspection.

The majority of the National Minimum Standards for Adoption and Adoption Agencies Regulations were assessed under the outcome areas of Staying Safe, Enjoying and Achieving, Positive Contribution and Organisation. A judgement for each outcome was reached after assessing a range of information obtained in the inspection.

The agency is meeting the National Minimum Standards for Adoption and the Adoption Agencies Regulations. Consequently, Staying Safe, Enjoying and Achieving, Making a Positive Contribution and Organisation are judged as good. One good practice recommendation is made which relates to case records.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last full inspection carried out in October 2006, resulted in five actions and 19 recommendations being made that related to each of the key outcome areas. The agency has made considerable efforts to address these matters and all the actions and recommendations made have been met. The work undertaken by the agency

has resulted in an improved service being provided to adopters, children, their birth parents and family.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

There are no National Minimum Standards for Adoption which address this outcome.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The agency carries out thorough, analytical assessments of prospective adopters which are well documented and of a good standard. All necessary enquiries and statutory checks are carried out, including where applicable, educational and employer references. A comprehensive health and safety checklist is used to ensure adopters are able to look after children in a safe manner.

The preparation training for adopters has been reviewed to ensure they remain appropriate to the needs of adopters, with changes implemented, where necessary.

Good assessments of children's needs are completed and greatly assist the effective matching of children with adopters. The adoption service has also developed a good matching matrix which enhances the matching process and clearly specifies the factors determining such a match. The chairperson of the selection meetings has been reviewed and the necessary changes implemented.

The agency has improved their systems for obtaining information about a child and their life before adoption. These systems and the work undertaken are kept under close review which has resulted in both life story work and books completed in a timely manner.

The service also intends to introduce life appreciation days which will involve all the significant individuals in a child's life and provide the adopters with first hand, qualitative information regarding the children to be placed with them.

There are clearly written adoption panel policies and procedures which fully meet the National Minimum Standards for Adoption and local authority Adoption Regulations 2003.

The service has improved its adoption panel minutes which are well-structured, informative and meet the National Minimum Standards for Adoption.

The agency's decision is communicated to adopters within the timescales laid down in Guidance to the Adoption and Children Act 2002. The agency decision maker signs all letters personally, clearly emphasising the importance of such a decision.

The agency has a safeguarding policy and procedure which fully meets the National Minimum Standards for Adoption and Regulations. There is a good recording system in place to enable staff to record safeguarding issues effectively. The agency ensures all those working in the agency are well supported to handle and manage safeguarding issues.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency recognises the importance of providing support to adopters in maintaining stable and permanent homes for children. A variety of qualitative pre and post adoption support services are available. Adopters are made aware of these support services at an early stage and this is reinforced throughout the preparation and assessment phases.

The agency has access to a variety of specialist advisers and services to meet its needs. There are written protocols regarding their roles.

Clear information is provided to prospective adopters about the service they can expect. The adoption service's practice is service user focused. Commissioning arrangements are supported by a written agreement which is regularly reviewed.

There is a complaints policy and procedure in place. The adoption service ensures those using the service are aware of their right to make representations and complaints and will support them in the process, if required.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The service clearly recognises the lifelong implications of adoption. Parents are provided with written information regarding the care planning processes for their child and are actively encouraged to become involved in them.

They are also encouraged and facilitated to provide information and photographs, so that they contribute to the child's sense of heritage, through the completion of life storybooks. Those seen were completed to a good standard, as was the life story work undertaken.

Birth parents and families are given further opportunities to maintain and update their child's heritage through direct or indirect contact via the agency's post box system. This post box system is well organised and robust.

In addition to this, the adoption service commissions an adoption support agency to provide an independent counselling and support service to birth parents and their

families where there is a permanence plan for a child. The service is actively promoted and there is an effective system in place to monitor the service provided.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

There are no National Minimum Standards for Adoption which address this outcome.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency has a Statement of Purpose and Children's Guide which contains all the information required under the National Minimum Standards for Adoption and Adoption Services Regulations 2003.

There are clear written procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the adoption service and a number of quality assurance systems are in place, for example, tracking systems, the adoption panel, file auditing and permanency planning documentation. The systems examined are effective in monitoring the agency's performance.

Robust recruitment and selection procedures are in place, with telephone enquiries made to verify the legitimacy of references. The personnel and panel member's files contain all the information required under the Adoption Agencies Regulations.

Those working in the adoption service are well-qualified, knowledgeable, skilled and experienced in adoption. The agency is adequately staffed and resourced to meet the needs of the service. There is a good training programme to enhance staff's individual skills and ensure they keep up to date with professional and legal developments. Staff have recently received updated safeguarding training.

There are appropriate policies and procedures in place for case recording and access to records. Case records are well organised, in good order and a file audit system is in place. However, no case decisions arising from the worker's supervision were found on file.

The agency has developed a disaster recovery plan specifically for the service which meets the requirements of the National Minimum Standards for Adoption.

The adoption agency has identifiable office premises which are fit for purpose.

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 decisions by supervisors are recorded on case files. (NMS 25.5)