

Gateshead Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Sean White
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Setting address	Gateshead Council, Prince Consort Road, GATESHEAD, Tyne and Wear, NE8 4HJ
Telephone number	0191 4333000
Email	
Registered person	Gateshead Council
Registered manager	Anne Roberts
Responsible individual	Alison North
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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 that undertakes or arranges all statutory adoption responsibilities under current legislation. This includes the recruitment, preparation and assessment and approval of adopters. It works in partnership with children's services to prepare, match and place children who have a plan for adoption with suitable parents. There is also a range of adoption support facilities for birth parents arranged through an Adoption Support Agency and other resources for accessing support for all people who have been affected by adoption.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

The agency has in many respects a good approach in undertaking its responsibilities and duties but there are inconsistencies in its operations that require attention. The recruitment and assessment of adopters is thorough and careful but some instances of performance and attention to detail, although recognised by management, have not been fully addressed.

The approach to planning for children's adoption is focused on matching them with the most suitable adoptive parents, and it has a good record in this area. There are inconsistencies, however, in early planning that require a more formal infrastructure.

Support for families who have been approved is good with a range of resources being available and accessible to enable placements to be safe and permanent. Post adoption support, however, is hampered in its development by a lack of staffing resources.

The arrangements for encouraging birth families to be involved in the planning for their children are well established, but there are inconsistencies in the gathering of information about children's histories for life-story work. Birth parents can access support through an arrangement with an adoption support agency.

The arrangements for managing the agency are well established and there is a coherent structure, underpinned by sound policies and procedures. The management of staff and organisational arrangements are generally good but some inconsistencies in performance, staffing resources and recording do not meet standards.

Improvements since the last inspection

Following the last inspection there were seven actions and 21 recommendations made in the report. Many of these issues have been satisfactorily addressed but

there are still matters that require attention; these include aspects of recording in case files and personnel records, and in particular, the arrangements for post adoption support.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

There is an active approach to the recruitment of adopters who are able to meet the needs of children requiring placements. A recruitment officer works alongside the agency staff to publicise the service, its requirements and responsibilities to children; this enables the agency to attract suitable people and families. The arrangements for matching children with families are well established and the agency has a good record of placing children in safe, secure and lasting placements.

The systems in place for planning for children, however, are inconsistent and confusing. There is no coherent procedure for referring children whose plan is adoption to the agency, which could create difficulties in respect of family finding at the earliest possible opportunity. When children are linked to prospective families all necessary information is made available and it is clear that great care is taken to ensure that adopters are fully informed about the needs of children. The Children's Permanence Reports, however, are not consistent in their quality and content, and are not written, in some cases, with the potential readership in mind.

The systems in place for preparing, assessing and approving adopters are generally sound, and in most cases good. Preparation groups are held at appropriately regular intervals, are well presented by experienced workers and include input from people with expertise in, or personal experience of, adoption. Assessment reports demonstrate, in the main, a thorough and rigorous approach to working with prospective adopters to determine their suitability. There are, however, inconsistencies in approach that show a weakness in the overall performance of the service; although the shortfalls are identified in the agency's quality control systems, the inconsistencies persist.

The adoption panel is governed by appropriately constructed policies and procedures; it is suitably constituted, sits regularly, always meets as a quorum and operates within standards and regulations. The administrative arrangements are efficiently organised and managed. There is, however, a vacancy for an independent member.

The chairperson of the panel is a suitably qualified professional with significant experience of adoption and social work with children. The business of the panel is

managed in a way that ensures due thoroughness is applied to its responsibilities. It has a focused approach to scrutinising the reports placed before it and is clear about the need to protect children's welfare when considering its recommendations. It has a strong approach to judging the quality of the work it has to scrutinise and does not make recommendations when information is incomplete.

Decisions are made in a timely way with all information being available.

The managers responsible for the adoption service demonstrate commitment and energy in their approach and are clearly motivated to developing the agency. They are experienced, qualified professionals with significant backgrounds in social work with children. The staff of the service are also suitably experienced and qualified and, in the main, demonstrate skills, knowledge and understanding of the complex world of adoption. There are, however, some shortfalls in the overall quality of the service that have yet to be addressed.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency provides strong and substantial support to approved adopters. There are systems in place to ensure that people who are approved but are awaiting a placement have access to support groups and are provided with further training. There are also informal support networks that adopters can involve themselves in. Agency workers liaise closely with children's social workers to support families throughout the matching, introduction and placement process; this continues at least until an adoption order is made.

Post adoption support is not very well developed. There are insufficient staff to develop this aspect of the agency's responsibilities and most of the support needs of people affected by adoption are carried through an arrangement with an adoption support agency (ASA). Although the service has a written contract with the ASA and monitors the arrangement, it does not have a sufficiently robust system of ensuring that service users are receiving the type and level of support they require.

The agency has access to a range of specialist advice. This includes the required medical adviser who sits on the adoption panel, and a legal advisor who attends most panels or provides written legal advice. There is also access to a therapy team and the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS).

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency provides opportunities for all birth parents to be involved in the planning for their child's future. They are invited to attend reviews and other forums where plans are made. Independent Reviewing Officers ensure that their views are sought and wishes considered. These are recorded clearly on reports.

The approach to gathering information about children's backgrounds and birth family histories, and the development of this into preparation for adoption and life-story work, is not consistent. Although efforts are made in many circumstances to achieve this at the earliest opportunity, in some cases there is too much reliance on, for instance, foster carers being the main providers of information.

Birth parents are provided with support, at whatever point they may need it, through an arrangement with an independent support agency. All birth parents are referred to this agency, unless they choose not to be, and the contractual arrangements are monitored frequently by the adoption service. There is no formal or systematic approach, however, to canvassing the views of birth parents about the quality or relevance of the support they receive.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The agency is governed by up to date policies and procedures that provide a realistic framework for the service's operational undertakings and strategic direction. These are underpinned by a business plan and supported by a realistic statement of purpose that outlines clearly the aims and objectives of the agency, and which includes all relevant information. There is also a well-presented children's guide that is interactive, allowing children to explore adoption and what it means to them.

The information provided for prospective adopters is of a good standard, well written and clearly lays out what a potential applicant may wish to know; it is welcoming and non-discriminatory. The service is well managed by people who are experienced and qualified. The arrangements for deputising are clear and lines of accountability and communication are well established and understood across the service. There are systems in place to enable the agency to operate efficiently and there is good administrative support.

The staff team is well supported through good and regular supervision. The arrangements for the allocation of work, and workload management, are fair and take into consideration people's skills and interests. There is also a very clear training ethic in the service; development opportunities are regularly available and workers are encouraged to attend, which they do.

The agency is struggling to meet all its responsibilities and strategic development areas because of a reduction in staffing levels. Although it is managing its recruitment and assessment responsibilities, adoption support is an area that does

not have the staffing resources for it to be developed.

The case files for both adopters and children include most of the required information, are well kept and can be accessed easily. Although detailed supervision records are kept, case decisions are not routinely placed on adopters' case files.

Records in respect of employed staff are generally good but there were some omissions noted. Panel members' files did not have all required information.

The premises are located in an accessible area of the town, are suitable for the purpose of carrying on an adoption agency and kept secure.

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 a coherent and consistent system for referring children, whose plan is adoption, to the adoption service to enable family finding to begin at the earliest opportunity. (NMS 2)
- develop a more consistent approach to the assessment of prospective adopters. (NMS 3)
- develop a consistent approach to the writing of Children's Permanence Reports. (NMS 5)
- ensure all staff involved in the agency have the skills and competence to undertake their responsibilities. (NMS 19)
- develop a system for evaluating and monitoring, with service users, support services provided by commissioned agencies. (NMS 33)
- promote and encourage the importance and relevance of life-story work based on effective and routine gathering of information about children's backgrounds at an early stage. (NMS 9)
- make arrangements for sufficient staff to be employed. (NMS 21)
- record all supervision decisions on case files. (NMS 25)
- include all required information on workers' and panel members' files. (NMS 28)