

Stockport MBC 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

Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council's adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters. The Council has commissioned a similar service for inter country adopters from a local voluntary adoption agency.

In addition, the service carries out the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters; the support of adoption placements; post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, including birth records counselling and intermediary work. The service also operates and maintains a letter box system, which supports information exchange in adoption placements. 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 good.

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

The inspection of the Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council was an announced inspection.

The main focus of the inspection was to determine whether the branch was providing a qualitative adoption service, with the children's welfare, safety and needs at the centre of the adoption process and permanent, stable adoptive homes provided.

All the Adoption National Minimum Standards (NMS) and the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003 were assessed under the outcome areas of Staying Safe, Enjoying and Achieving, Positive Contribution and Organisation. Overall the adoption service was meeting the Adoption NMS and the Adoption Agencies Regulations. Consequently, Staying Safe, Making a Positive Contribution, Enjoying and Achieving and Organisation were judged as good.

One action and 13 recommendations were made in this inspection. The action relates to providing prospective adopters with their assessment report within the legal specified timescale. 13 recommendations were made, two of these related to the service's practice, one to the health and safety checklist used to ensure adopters care for children safely, eight to the improvement of records, one to improvements in the agency's quality assurance systems and one to the three yearly renewal of panel members' CRB checks.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last full inspection of the Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council was carried out in September 2004, which resulted in seven actions and 21 recommendations being made. In February 2006, a visit was made to the adoption service to follow up these actions and recommendations. The service had made strident efforts to address a large number of these matters; however three actions & four recommendations remained outstanding. Two of the actions made related to personnel and panel members files, which did not contain the required regulatory information. The third action concerned insufficient administrative staffing levels within the adoption service. With regard to the four recommendations made, two related to risk assessments and two to the service's written policies. In this inspection, with the exception of one recommendation, all these matters had been addressed. The one outstanding recommendation relates to the improvement of the health and safety checklist used by the service. A recommendation regarding this matter has been made in this inspection.

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 adoption service's recruitment strategy is based on an awareness of children requiring adoption. It is a good, effective strategy, which ensures there are sufficient adopters to meet the needs of children requiring adoptive placements. There are clear processes and procedures to handle adoption enquiries and to follow up any expressions of interest. Information meetings are held on a regular basis and adopters are complimentary about the presentation and quality of information provided. The service is very child focused with children matched to adopters, who best meet their assessed needs and every effort is made to ensure siblings are placed together, if this is assessed as appropriate.

Identification of children requiring adoption and management of matching and placing children is well coordinated through effective operational systems that promote continuity and cooperation between the adoption service and children's services.

There is a formal preparation, assessment and approval process of adopters. Preparation training is provided in collaboration with two other adoption agencies. This enables preparation groups to be held every two months and ensures adopters can attend a group without too long a wait. Preparation training is also tailored to meet the varying needs of adopters, for example, second time round adopters. In addition, the service has also made arrangements for those wishing to adopt a child

from overseas to attend inter-country preparation groups, which are provided in collaboration with another agency.

Adopters generally spoke positively about the preparation training, stating that groups were 'well organised', the training materials used 'informative', 'honest', 'realistic' and 'challenged one's thoughts about adoption'. Some adopters though said that the case studies used in the training 'concentrated too heavily on the negative aspects of adoption' and were 'off putting'. Others, who had attended a preparation group organised by another agency, stated that it would have been helpful; if a Stockport worker had been available to answer questions specific to their service. However, the majority of adopters said that the preparation training was good and had provided them with a sound foundation to explore all aspects of adoption.

Adopters' assessments are generally well documented and of a good standard, in so far as they are thorough, analytical and cover such issues as parenting capacity and diversity well. In situations, where there were other children in the family, there were also some good examples of thorough, direct work being carried out to ascertain their views regarding adoption. However, not all assessments were of this standard, for example, in one assessment, there was insufficient information regarding the applicants' decision to adopt and the likely impact that the introduction of an adoptive child might have on their own children. The service obtains written references in relation to the adopters, employer references and checks with applicants' former partners. All necessary enquiries and statutory checks in relation to prospective adopters and other members of the household, who are aged 16 years or over are obtained. In some files though, the internal form used to record Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks did not always contain the necessary information, for example, the date of the CRB or the disclosure number. This made it difficult to audit and evidence that the CRB checks had been obtained. The agency ensures adopters are able to look after children in a safe manner through the use of a health and safety checklist. This checklist though is not comprehensive.

Adopters stated their assessments had been thorough and carried out by professional, knowledgeable, skilled and sensitive staff. Their report was accurate and with one exception, was given to adopters in the required legislative timescale.

Adopters receive written information regarding the matching, introductory and placement processes and information is provided regarding the National Adoption Register. Before a match is agreed, the adoption service makes considerable efforts to ensure adopters are given accurate, up-to-date and full written information regarding a child. Adopters are also given the opportunity to discuss this information, enabling them to consider the implications of this information for themselves and their family.

The adoption service's practice is child focussed and careful thought is given to matching, with the needs of the child a paramount consideration in any decision making. The service has therefore been proactive in improving the quality of information provided to adopters and have mentored and supported childcare workers in the completion of the child permanence report. However, despite this, the

child permanence reports are of variable quality.

There are clearly written adoption panel policies and procedures, which fully meet the adoption NMS and Regulations (Regs).

Adopters are invited to attend the adoption panel. Good preparatory work is undertaken with them prior to their attendance. Adopters stated that the chairperson and panel members 'welcomed' them and did their best to put them 'at ease' and the questions asked were 'appropriate' and 'pertinent'.

The panel is appropriately constituted and arranged at a frequency that avoids any delay in considering the approval of prospective adopters. The panel was well organised and chaired. Panel members were well prepared, made appropriate observations and asked relevant questions. Panel minutes are informative and clearly state the panel's discussion, however, the reasons for conclusions reached and the panel's recommendations are not always clearly recorded.

The agency's decision maker ensures all information relating to a case, as well as the panel minutes, are thoroughly scrutinised before making a decision. Notifications of the decision are sent out within the timescales.

Staff recruitment systems are thorough and demonstrated that workers and managers appointed are suitable to undertake their responsibilities; all checks are routinely undertaken. The manager and all staff working within the adoption service are all appropriately qualified, knowledgeable, skilled and experienced in their work.

There is a safeguarding policy and procedure, which fully meets the adoption NMS and Regs. A good recording system is in place to enable staff to record safeguarding issues effectively. All those working in the service are well supported to handle and manage safeguarding issues.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Stockport fully recognises the importance of providing support to adopters in maintaining stable and permanent homes for children. This has resulted in considerable development of the support services available to adopters, both before and after the adoption order.

These services include financial support packages, a news letter and a coffee morning, which also serves as a support group for adopters. An annual fun day is also arranged for adopters & their children. The service provides internal and external post approval training for adopters, for example, the community children and adolescent mental health services (KITE) provided a course on promoting attachments. Stockport has also paid for external training from Adoption U.K. in order to meet some adopters' specific needs. The agency has recently made an agreement with the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) to

undertake consultation and direct work with adopters and children, who are experiencing difficulties.

Stockport has commissioned a voluntary agency, to provide a service to inter country adopters, which also includes the provision of support services.

Adopters are made aware of the support services available at an early stage in their contact with the agency. Requests for support are responded to 'promptly' and the support provided is described as 'appropriate' and 'very helpful'. Adoption support plans were generally of a good standard, though not all were signed by all the necessary people. Adopters confirmed that they had been informed of the support package available to them and were confident such support would be provided, if required.

The adoption service has access to a variety of specialist advisers, with written protocols in place regarding their roles. The range of specialist services available increases the likelihood of adopters receiving appropriate support at all stages of the adoption process. Both staff and adopters indicated that the specialist advisers provided a good service and were a valuable asset to the agency's adoption services.

The service responds promptly to adoption enquiries, which are dealt with in a thoughtful and sensitive manner. Agency practice is focused on those using the service. They are listened to and their wishes and feelings considered. The service fully consults and encourages service users to be involved in any decisions made, which affects their life. The agency also ensures that the welfare and safety of the service user and others affected by the adoption are carefully considered, before deciding any service should be provided. Any adoption service commissioned by the agency is supported by a written agreement, which is regularly reviewed. This ensures the service provided is of the required qualitative standard and able to meet the needs of those using the service and the agency.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency has a clear system to work with birth parents and their families in the care plans for their children. They are invited to participate in all reviews and their views and wishes are actively sought and recorded.

There is a clear commitment to preparing a child for adoption and in developing a coordinated, efficient approach to the production of life-story work. However, life story work is not carried out to a consistent standard, for whilst there were some good examples of such work, there were other examples, where there had been some delay in gathering information and completing the life story book.

Contact arrangements are generally well recorded. There are limited direct contact arrangements, which are usually managed by the adopters; however, Stockport will provide adopters support, where the arrangements are difficult or complex.

Arrangements for indirect contact are managed through the letter box system. This system is managed in an effective and efficient manner.

The agency has a service level agreement with an independent organisation to offer independent support and counselling to birth parents and families. There are clear arrangements in place to monitor the effectiveness and value for money of this arrangement. There is a recognition that the uptake of this service could be improved and this is being actively addressed.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council's adoption service is generally well managed.

The Statement of Purpose is comprehensive and contains all the information required under the Adoption Agencies NMS and Regulations. The document is circulated to staff and is readily available to service users. Written policies and procedures have been revised in accordance with the Adoption and Children Act 2002. These documents are of a good standard, accurately reflect the Statement of Purpose and provide a clear framework for the service's operation.

The service has two Children's Guides, one for younger and older children. The Guides are available in a variety of different formats to meet the differing needs of children and contain all the necessary information prescribed in the Adoption NMS and Regs.

Adopters are provided with well written and comprehensive information regarding the adoption process. This literature clearly indicates that people who are interested in becoming adoptive parents will be welcomed without prejudice and this is reflected in the service's practice.

The service has a system in place to prioritise the assessment of those prospective adopters, who are most likely to meet the needs of children waiting to be adopted. They also provide written information about the preparation and support services available to prospective adopters.

The adoption service's management team are extremely knowledgeable, experienced and skilled in childcare and adoption. They are very committed to the service and provide strong, effective leadership to the adoption service. Staff speak highly of the service's management team and they provide a good role model to their staff.

There are clear written procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the adoption service. A supervisory and appraisal system is in place, which is used to monitor staff's performance and ensure a quality service. Staff are supervised and appraised in accordance with the agency's policies. The agency's administrative support is of a good standard and enables staff to carry out their work in an effective and efficient manner. There are quality assurance systems in place to monitor service performance, however these were not robust, for example, there was some delay in the managerial oversight of case records. The Council's scrutiny committee though is committed to the adoption of children as a positive choice for permanence and is kept fully informed of the agency's activities.

The adoption service's staff are clear about their roles, and lines of accountability and communication are good. Staff are able to demonstrate knowledge, experience and skills in working with children in general and adoption in particular. They are encouraged and well supported in their work. Staff acknowledged they receive regular supervision, both on an informal and formal basis. The adoption service has sufficient staff resources to undertake the range of work required. Staff spoke positively of the wide range of training and professional development opportunities provided to them, which they stated were of a good standard.

There are appropriate policies and procedures in place for case recording and access to records. Case records are well organised, however, not all contained comprehensive or up-to-date information. There were also some breaches of confidentiality, for example, one file contained a case record and a copy of an adoption order relating to another child, there were also some case records undated and signed.

There is a clearly written policy and procedure in place for accessing records, which meet the legislative requirements. The adoption service's management team ensures that these arrangements are followed.

The overall administration is efficient, well managed and appropriately structured to provide support to a busy agency. Administrative records are well maintained, stored confidentially and securely kept. Personnel files demonstrated a rigorous approach to recruitment and selection, all files included required information, were well ordered and securely stored. Panel members' files are similarly well ordered and kept. However, not all contained the information, as required by the NMS & regulations, for example, relevant experience documented and CRB checks renewed every three years.

The premises are well resourced. There is space, storage, good information technology equipment and communication systems. The premises are accessible, have sufficient parking and are fit for purpose.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

| Std. | Action | Due date |
|------|---|------------|
| 4 | ensure the prospective adopter receives a copy of the prospective adopters report and invites them to send any observations in writing to the agency within 10 working days, beginning with the date on which the notification is sent (Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, Part 4, Regulation 25 (8)). | 01/04/2008 |

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure prospective adopters' assessments are of a consistent qualitative standard (NMS 4)
- improve the system used to record statutory checks (NMS 4)
- improve the health and safety checklist for prospective adopters (NMS 4)
- improve the quality of child permanence reports (NMS 5)
- improve the quality of the adoption panel minutes (NMS 12)
- ensure life story work and books are completed in a timely manner and to a consistent qualitative standard (NMS 8)
- improve the quality assurance systems used by the adoption service
- improve the quality of case records (NMS 25)
- ensure that there are no breaches of confidentiality in case records (NMS 26).
- ensure case records are legible and non-stigmatising (NMS 27)
- ensure case records are signed and dated by the author (NMS 27)
- ensure comprehensive files are maintained for panel members', specifically written references are dated and relevant experience documented (NMS 28)
- ensure panel members' CRB's are renewed every 3 years (NMS 28).