

Leeds 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

Leeds City Council's adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters. A voluntary agency though has been commissioned to provide preparation training for inter country adopters.

The service also 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. In addition, the service 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 an adoption support agency.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The inspection of Leeds City Council's adoption service was an announced inspection.

The main focus of the inspection was to determine whether the adoption agency 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 (LAAS Regs 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. The outcome areas of Staying Safe, Making a Positive Contribution, Organisation were judged as good and Enjoying and Achieving was judged as outstanding.

Three actions and 14 recommendations were made in this inspection. One of the actions related to the quality assurance systems used by the agency, which were not robust. A second action related to insufficient staffing resources in the service. The third action to ensuring all the required regulatory information relating to personnel and panel members was obtained.

With regard to the 14 recommendations, four of these related to improvements in the agency's records and one to the storage of records. Four recommendations

related to the adoption panels and three in relation to professional practice issues. One recommendation was made, which related to recruitment practice and another one to the premises used by adoption service staff.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last full inspection of Leeds City Council was carried out in March 2005, which resulted in 10 actions and 19 recommendations being made. Whilst the service had made strident efforts to address most of these matters; two of the actions & five of the recommendations were identified as continuing to require addressing 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.

Leeds' adoption service has a good, effective recruitment strategy, which is based on an awareness of children requiring adoption. Its successful recruitment campaigns have resulted in a diverse range of adopters being recruited, which has resulted in more placement choice for children. Thus, large groups of siblings, children with disabilities and children from minority ethnic groups have been effectively matched and placed with adoptive families. However, the service recognises that it needs to increase the recruitment of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) adopters and is actively addressing this. The service is also making a case for a post to be created, which will be dedicated to BME adoption recruitment, assessment and support issues.

There are clear processes and procedures to handle adoption enquiries and to follow up any expressions of interest. However, some adopters indicated that there is sometimes a lack of clarity in the information provided at the initial enquiry stage. Information meetings are held on a regular basis and adopters are complimentary about the presentation and quality of information provided.

The adoption service is child focussed and makes every effort to ensure children are matched with adopters, who best meet their assessed needs. It also fully recognises that a child's needs are a paramount consideration in matching a child to adopters. The service has therefore worked hard to improve the quality of information provided adopters. The quality of the written information provided adopters is of variable quality, for example, the child permanence report (CPR). This lack of consistent, detailed and qualitative written CPRS is in danger of compromising the effectiveness of the matching process and thereby increases the potential for an adoption breakdown.

There is a thorough preparation, assessment and approval process of adopters. Preparation training is tailored to meet the varying needs of adopters, for example, arrangements have been made with two voluntary adoption agencies for second time round and inter country adopters to attend training that is specific to their needs.

Adopters spoke positively about preparation training stating that it was 'well organised'. The training materials used 'informative' and 'thought provoking'. Staff were said to be 'very welcoming' and a 'warm', 'friendly' atmosphere developed, which enabled those attending to participate in group discussions more freely. Adopters' assessments are generally of a good quality; in so far as they were thorough, analytical and cover issues of parenting capacity well. However, some assessments were less thorough; for example, one assessment did not fully reflect the family's changed circumstances, in another the quality of the assessment would have been improved with further exploration and analysis of the family's relationships. The service carries out 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. The service also ensures adopters are able to look after children in a safe manner through the use of a health and safety checklist.

Adopters were positive about the assessment process, which they described as 'open' and 'transparent'. Staff were said to carry out their work in a 'professional', 'knowledgeable' and 'skilled' manner. All adopters stated that their report was accurate and given to them in the required legislative timescale.

Adopters receive written information regarding the matching, introductory and placement processes. Information is also provided regarding the National Adoption Register. Once a match has been identified, adopters receive information about the child including the opportunity to meet with other professionals and foster carers. However, a more consistent approach regarding this practice is required. The adoption service does not currently hold life appreciation days, though is actively considering introducing these to the service.

The adoption panel has a clear written set of policies and procedures which govern its function and operation. There is a well established practice of adopters being invited to attend the panel. Preparatory work is undertaken with them prior to their attendance, for example, their adoption worker talks to them about the process and written leaflets are provided. Some adopters though commented that the panel literature should be more personalised and user friendly, for example, with photographs of panel members. However, observation of the panel and comments made by a number of adopters indicate that their attendance at panel works well, with adopters made welcome and put at ease. This friendliness though does not detract from the panel's thoroughness in considering matters before them.

Leeds has three adoption panels, which have a good mix of members reflecting both personal and professional experience. However, the panels do not reflect the community they serve, for example, there is a lack of BME panel members. The

panels though are arranged at a frequency that avoids any delay in considering the approval of prospective adopters. However, the administrative support provided to the panels is insufficient and affects their organisation and efficiency.

The panel observed was well chaired; panel members were well prepared, made appropriate observations and asked relevant questions. On occasions though not all the necessary information is provided to the panel in advance of the panel date. This can cause panel members some difficulties as they have to read, quickly consider all issues arising from this information, in what is already a tightly scheduled programme of work. Panel minutes are informative and clearly state the panel's discussion; however, the reasons for the panel's conclusions and recommendations though 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. However, notifications of the decision are not always sent out within the necessary timescales.

The manager and all staff working within the adoption service are all appropriately qualified, skilled and experienced in their work. However, staff recruitment systems are not sufficiently robust to ensure children are adequately safeguarded.

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 outstanding.

The adoption service fully recognises the importance of providing sensitive and qualitative support to adopters in maintaining stable and permanent homes for children. Considerable efforts are therefore made to ensure that adopters retain their social worker following their approval. This arrangement continues throughout the matching, introductions and placement of children, until at least the adoption order is made.

They have also developed a sophisticated and extensive range of support services, which are available for adopters both before and after the adoption order. The services include financial support packages, a news letter, which is produced twice a year and a buddy scheme for adopters. There are also a number of social events for adopters and a variety of support groups, which are designed to meet the differing needs of adopters, for example, a support group for single adopters, Asian adopters, parents of adolescents, a soft play group for parents of young children. There are also support groups to the varying needs of adopted children and young people, for example, a support for young people, aged 12-14, a group. There is also another group for young people aged 14-16, which is run in conjunction with the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAHMS). A three day residential course was

also provided to a group of older adopted young people.

Leeds has good working relationship with a variety of Council services and as a consequence adopters are also able to access a variety of specialist services to meet specific needs, for example, additional educational support, as well as the services of the educational psychologist. They also have an excellent relationship with (CAMHS), who run three adoption clinics and also provide training, consultation and direct work with families. In addition, the service has developed good working relationships with local voluntary agencies and services, who also offer support to adoptive families, for example, the supported lodgings scheme. Internal and External training is also available to adopters both pre and post adoption.

Adopters are made aware of the support services available at an early stage in their contact with the agency. Adoption support plans were generally of a good standard, though further work is being undertaken to ensure the plans are of a consistent qualitative standard. Requests for support are responded to 'promptly' and are described as being of an 'extremely high standard'. Adopters confirmed that they had been informed of the support package available to them and were confident the service would provide such support in the future, should this be 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. Staff indicated that the specialist advisers provided a good service and were a valuable asset to the agency's adoption services. A similar view was held by some adopters, who had used their 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 the agency and its service users.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The adoption service fully recognises the importance of birth parents contributing to their children's future. They therefore make considerable efforts to engage with birth parents and actively encourage them to express their views and wishes regarding their children's futures. This information is recorded in the CPR.

Once a match has been agreed, there is an opportunity for the birth and adoptive

parents to meet. There was evidence that such meetings are carefully prepared for, sensitively handled and generally well managed. However, some birth parents have suggested that the process could be enhanced, with the introduction of a formal, debriefing session, after the meeting.

Leeds has a contract with an independent organisation to offer independent support and counselling to birth parents and families. Clear arrangements are in place to monitor the service's effectiveness and ensure it provides value for money.

There is a strong commitment to preparing a child for adoption and develop a coordinated approach to the production of life-story work. However, life story work is not carried out to a consistent standard; for whilst some work is completed to a good standard and in a timely way; in others, there is a delay in gathering information and completing the life story book.

Contact arrangements are well recorded. Direct contact is usually managed by the adopters; however, Leeds 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 efficient manner.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The adoption service has an up-to-date statement of purpose (SOP), which quite clearly details its aims, objectives and the services provided. This document is supported by a range of policies and procedures, which inform and underpin the operations and strategic direction of the agency. The service has a colourful, attractively presented children's guide, which is in a user friendly format and contains all the required information.

Adopters are provided with well written, comprehensive information about the adoption process, which is sent out in a timely way. This literature is welcoming, does not discriminate and is attractively presented.

There is 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 and this is effectively communicated to adopters.

The management of the adoption service is undertaken by people who are appropriately qualified and have the necessary background, knowledge and skills in adoption. They demonstrate a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities and are committed to the service. Staff speak highly of them and indicate that the adoption service is effectively led and managed.

There are clear written procedures and systems for monitoring and controlling the activities of the adoption service. However, there is some variability regarding the effective operation of these systems. Some systems are robustly applied, for example, the reporting systems to the scrutiny committee, whilst others, such as file sampling are not as robust.

Adoption 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.

Leeds adoption service is well managed, with resources used to the best possible effect. Insufficient administrative and professional staff resources though, at times, impair the service's effectiveness and efficiency, for example, administration of the adoption panels, family finding for children with complex needs.

The service recognises the importance of staff training in service development and a high priority is given to it. Workers are therefore encouraged and enabled to take any training and development opportunities available. Staff spoken with were extremely positive about the range of training and professional development opportunities provided, which were said to be of a very good standard.

There are appropriate policies and procedures in place for case recording and access to records. Case records are well organised, in good order and contained all the required information. Decisions by supervisors are recorded on case files and they are audited on a frequent basis.

There are appropriate policies and procedures in place for case recording. Case records are well organised and maintained. Decisions by supervisors are recorded on case files. There was also evidence of file audits on some of the files, though there was no indication of the remedial action taken, when necessary. In some files, the case records were not up-to-date, comprehensive had not been dated or signed by the author and contained inaccuracies, for example, the date of a matching panel. Some case records also breached confidentiality as they contained names of other adopters and children

There is a clearly written policy and procedure in place for accessing records, which meet the legislative requirements and is strictly followed. The service ensures that separate records are kept for staff, and any allegations or complaints that are made. These records are well maintained and securely stored.

Personnel and Panel Members files are well ordered and securely stored. The recruitment and selection process though is not sufficiently robust, as not all personnel files contained the information required, for example, two written references, and telephone verification to confirm the legitimacy of references. Panel members' files contain most of the required information, though they did not contain

a recent photograph.

The adoption services premises cover three offices. Whilst two of these offices were fit for purpose, one was not, as there was insufficient space, storage, communication systems and information technology equipment to meet the needs of the service. In addition, adoption records were not stored in a manner to minimise the risk of damage from fire or water.

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 |
|------|---|------------|
| 17 | ensure robust quality assurance systems are implemented and maintained for all aspects of the adoption service (Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003, 7(a)(b)) | 01/06/2008 |
| 21 | ensure that there are a sufficient number of competent staff working for the purposes of the adoption service (Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003,10(a)(b)) | 30/06/2008 |
| 28 | ensure all the required information relating to the adoption service's personnel and panel members are obtained (Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003, 6 (2)(c). | 01/06/2008 |

Recommendations

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

- ensure children's wishes and feelings are taken into account in accordance with their age and understanding and are fully documented (st 2)
- ensure prospective adopters' assessments are of a consistent qualitative standard (NMS 4)
- improve the quality of child permanence reports (NMS 5)
- ensure membership of the adoption panels reflect the diverse community they serve (NMS 11)
- ensure all necessary information is provided panel members in advance of the date of the panel (NMS12)
- improve the quality of the adoption panel minutes (NMS 12)
- ensure agency decisions and written notifications of this decision are made in a

timely manner (NMS 13)

- ensure that life story work and the production of a life story book is carried out to a consistent standard and provided, in a timely way (NMS 8)
- ensure that there are no breaches of confidentiality in agency records (NMS 26)
- ensure the system to monitor the quality and adequacy of records is consistently applied and remedial action is taken, when necessary (NMS 27)
- ensure case records are signed and dated by the author (NMS 27)
- ensure that there is evidence of telephone verification of references (NMS 19).
- ensure all the service's premises are fit for purpose (NMS 29)
- ensure all adoption records are stored in a manner to minimise the risk of damage from fire and water (NMS 25).