

North Yorkshire County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Sean White / 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

This is a local authority adoption agency, that undertakes or makes arrangements for all statutory responsibilities, in relation to the adoption of children, as determined by current legislation and guidance. It is a county-wide service but managed on a split basis of east and west. The responsibilities of the agency are the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters, the matching and placement of children with adopters and support for anyone affected by adoption. Some aspects of support are contracted out to an independent agency.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This is an agency that promotes the safety and well-being of children who are, or will be, adopted by pursuing a thorough and rigorous approach, to the recruitment and assessment of suitable people. This work is undertaken by skilled and experienced managers and staff who demonstrate commitment, seek the best possible outcomes and undertake their duties, with a clear focus on inclusion and identity. The adoption panel provides a continuing rigour to assessments.

There is a clear focus on supporting children and families during placement, including good cooperative working, which encourages positive attachments and optimistic outcomes for the future. Birth parents are included as much as possible in the planning and preparation and the production of good quality life-story work, shows the agency has a positive approach to encouragement and inclusion.

The agency is well managed at all levels and this brings clarity and efficiency to the work of the service. The clarity of policies and procedures provides a solid infrastructure, that informs and directs the agency's work and people are clear about the structure of the organisation. Workers are enabled and encouraged in their duties by a supportive management, who provides supervision and guidance, that encourages good and improved practice and training to improve skills and knowledge.

The administrative arrangements are efficient and provide the service with a business support service, that complements the management of the service overall.

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency has improved considerably since the last full inspection three years ago. In particular, the production of clear and robust policies and procedures has provided for greater clarity in operational matters and provided a focus for direction and

development strategically. Changes in management have also had an impact on improvement, with a more focused approach to managing the service in a more cohesive way within the wider children's services. This has brought a more coherent and dynamic approach to meeting children's needs through adoption.

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 strong approach to recruiting the most appropriate people, to provide adoptive families for children. It has a marketing plan (recruitment strategy), that outlines the approach for prioritising the people who are potentially able to provide homes for children with complex needs and backgrounds. It is clear that the service is focused on ensuring that children have the best possible opportunities, through safe matching and that their futures are secure and safe through rigorous practices.

The prospective adopters assessment reports demonstrate a thorough approach to examining people's capacity as adoptive parents. Their clarity and depth, provide a strong overview and analysis from which recommendations and decisions can be made with confidence and ensure that applicants understand the process and underpinning need for thoroughness. The preparation courses are based on a sound model, that enables applicants to be fully informed of the needs of children, the responsibilities of adoptive families and the need to protect children from all forms of abuse and neglect. The courses also inform applicants of the process of the adoption journey, how matching them with children is managed and the support that the agency is able to provide.

The thoroughness of the agency continues through the adoption panel, which gives a rigorous scrutiny to all reports presented to it. It is an appropriately constituted panel, whose membership is committed and conscientious in its approach, which is well managed and chaired and which welcomes applicants in a sensitive and inclusive way. The panel has also started to invite approved adopters, when they are being considered for a match with a child. The management and administrative arrangements for the panel, including the production of clear, well presented minutes, are efficient and enable business to be undertaken with confidence. Decisions are made in a timely way by a committed and determined senior manager and successful applicants receive a sensitive and warm letter of approval.

The staff recruitment practices are thorough and ensure only the most suitable workers and managers are appointed. All workers are thoroughly vetted and checked and Criminal Records Bureau checks (CRB) are undertaken in every case. Workers

demonstrate a deep understanding of adoption practice and are clear about child care law and the legislation that governs adoption matters. They are clear about their duties and responsibilities and have a strong commitment to the agency's thorough approach to assessing and supporting adopters.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency's approach to supporting families is strong. It is committed to the long term outcomes for children in adoptive placements and has a robust and developing strategy, for ensuring that placements are secure, well established and optimistic. Adoption service staff work well with children's social workers to establish a good match. They work collaboratively, to effect smooth transitions of children from foster care to permanent placements and to ensure families understand the range of resources available for support.

It is clear that the agency places emphasis on enabling adopters to develop their skills in parenting, through a range of support strategies. This helps the adopters to understand the importance of children's histories and backgrounds and how this is a key element in their developing identity.

The agency has access to a range of resources that assists in the provision of support, both for the service as a whole, through sound medical and legal advice and to families, through specialist children's mental health services and educational psychologists.

Post adoption support is provided, wherever required or necessary and the agency has recently increased its staffing capacity, to effect this more efficiently and effectively. Assessments of need are routinely carried out, with services and support provided on the outcome of those assessments and in a way that is acknowledged as appropriate by users.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency has an active approach to encouraging and enabling birth parents, to be involved in the planning for their children's future. Support and guidance is provided, for them to contribute to their child's permanence report. The birth parent's views and wishes are clearly sought and recorded, with significant efforts being made in some cases. Every birth parent is offered the opportunity to seek support from an independent support agency and there are mechanisms in place to monitor this.

To enable children to have a positive outlook on their identity and heritage, the agency has a committed approach to gathering information from birth families and encouraging birth parents, to provide as much detail about family backgrounds as possible. The use of this information is presented well in life-story books. The agency

has a very positive approach to this essential, but often overlooked aspect of adoption work. A conscientious and skilled approach to this area is evident and is supported, by the provision of training to a wide range of personnel involved in adoption. This enables birth parents to make a contribution to the child's future and consequently, enables children to be fully informed of their history and antecedents.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The organisation of the agency is well supported by a Statement of Purpose, that provides a clear outline of the aims and objectives of the service and how they are to be achieved. This is underpinned by well structured and up to date policies and procedures and a child friendly guide to adoption.

The commitment of the agency to ensuring that only the most suitable people are recruited to be adopters, is demonstrated in their approach to providing good quality information to all applicants. The information pack is detailed and gives a clear outline of the adoption process and the agency's approach. The response to enquirers is speedy and initial visits are carried out, to elicit the prospective applicants' motivation and to provide further detailed information, to ensure they are fully informed of processes and expectations.

The management of the agency, is established in a spirit of commitment to children's well-being and their futures in successful adoptive placements. All the managers in the agency, demonstrated significant expertise in and understanding of, adoption issues and undertake their duties and responsibilities effectively and efficiently, in pursuit of successful outcomes. The clarity of policies and procedures, provides strong underpinning for the agency's operations, which are focused and conducted with confidence.

The arrangements for organising workload and allocation are fair and they focus on the efficiency of the service. The arrangements take into consideration the skills, interests and capacity of the staff and ensure that outcomes are achievable. Workers are well supported to undertake their duties, through encouragement and casework supervision and it was clear that they felt valued by the organisation as a whole. Realistic quality management systems are in place and senior managers and the executive of the agency, have a commitment to the effectiveness and success of the service. There has been a recent increase in the staffing establishment, enabling the agency to undertake the whole range of duties and responsibilities effectively. Good training and development opportunities, enable the staff to enhance their skills and knowledge and to keep abreast of practice and legislative issues in adoption work.

Record keeping and management of information is of a high standard with a clear approach to content, maintenance and quality. Children's and adopters' case recording is efficiently organised, regularly audited and contained all required information. Arrangements for the sharing of information and access by other agencies, are robust and follow all requirements of data protection and confidentiality. Personnel files and the records in respect of adoption panel members, contain all necessary and required details. Record keeping overall and the administrative infrastructure is efficient and well managed, with all due regard given to confidentiality and security issues.

The agency staff work from different locations throughout the county. The main office from where the service is managed is suitable for its purpose, although arrangements to relocate to a different building are imminent.