

Stockton on Tees Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

Unique reference number	SC056876
Inspection date	15/09/2008
Inspector	Sean White
Type of inspection	Key

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Date of last inspection	20/09/2005

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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 matters relating to the adoption of children under current legislation. It recruits, prepares, assesses and approves adoptive parents, and places children with them. The agency supports adoptive placements, supports children and adults affected by adoption, and arranges for birth parents to be counselled and supported.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The agency has a strong, thorough approach to its responsibilities in ensuring that children's safety and wellbeing is promoted through adoption. It recruits only the most suitable people to be adoptive parents through its rigorous processes and takes great care in its consideration that only the most appropriate matches and placements are achieved.

There is a conscientious and well considered approach to supporting adoptive families, through using a range of initiatives and resources, that enables placements and children's futures to be confidently established. Children's histories and birth parent involvement is a strong aspect of the agency's well-coordinated and considered approach to an overall, coherent adoption strategy. There are, however, some inconsistencies in approach in some areas.

The agency is well managed in most areas by a well-established and experienced professional team. It is staffed by a group of workers who bring a wide range of skills, experience and knowledge to the service. The underpinning statement of purpose and policies and procedures provide a sound framework for the service's operations; the children's guide, in its evolving format, is innovative and impressive. Senior managers and the executive provide a strong and involved infrastructure that enables operations and strategies to be undertaken within a framework of support and encouragement. The service is generally well managed administratively, but there have been capacity issues in recent times and there are some shortfalls in administrative processes.

Improvements since the last inspection

This is a continually improving and evolving agency that takes seriously its responsibilities and welcomes inspection as a positive influence on quality of service. Since the last visit there has been a marked improvement in the agency's approach to the recruitment of adopters, which is now much more coherent and focused. The

adoption panel is much clearer about its duties and responsibilities and how these are to be undertaken within the context of recent changes to legislation.

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 very thorough approach to ensuring that children placed for adoption are safe and that their welfare is protected. There is a very careful approach to matching children with the most suitable families through a range of checks and balances that determine the most appropriate placements. The recruitment strategy is focused on approving a range of adopters that can meet the wide spectrum of needs demonstrated by children requiring placements.

The vetting, preparation and assessment process is very thorough and is clearly aimed at ensuring that the most appropriate people are approved as adoptive parents. There is a clearly defined process that brings a rigorous and committed approach to working with applicants who demonstrate potential as adopters, which includes well defined operational and administrative practices.

Approved adopters who are being considered for a possible placement are provided with all the relevant and necessary information that is available on the child. The agency provides a range of opportunities for adopters to source information directly from specialists who are involved in children's lives, which encourages families to make informed decisions. Although there are some inconsistencies in the reports on children placed for adoption, every effort is made to seek and provide all the necessary details to secure a suitable match.

The panel is appropriately constituted and always meets as a quorum. The management and organisation of adoption panel business is efficient and undertaken with professionalism and due rigour with recommendations being made in receipt of all required information and detail. Decisions are made in a timely way by an experienced and knowledgeable senior manager. The procedures that govern the panel, however, are out of date and do not reflect changes in legislation.

The manager of the agency is a very experienced and qualified professional. The workers in the service have a very wide range of skills, experience, knowledge and understanding of social work with children and family placement. In the main, recruitment procedures are thorough and well managed; there are, however, some personnel issues that are not as robust as they should be, particularly in respect of workers not being asked to disclose any convictions at the application stage.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency has a strong approach to supporting and maintaining adoptive placements. It achieves this by using a range of initiatives that are clearly aimed at promoting and establishing sound adoptive families that are equipped to undertake the care of the children placed with them.

There is a range of specialist agencies that the service sources and utilises to provide the most appropriate support in the right environment and circumstances.

The agency also has a dynamic and sophisticated approach to the support and advice provided to people who are, or have been, affected by adoption, including adults.

The agency is well equipped with specialist advice from both the legal and medical advisers; they are accessible to the panel and the agency, and provide input of a very high quality. This enables the service to deliver support, and provide accurate advice and information across the board.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Every effort is made to involve birth parents in the planning for their children's futures and they are encouraged and enabled to attend reviews where decisions are made. Written comments made by birth parents are taken seriously and acted upon if appropriate and realistic.

There is an active approach to ensuring that children are appropriately prepared for adoption and in the gathering of information about their histories and backgrounds. Life-story work is seen as an important factor in the adoption continuum, and although there are some inconsistencies in the timely completion of life-story books, there is an impressive approach to their quality and presentation.

The agencies approach to working with birth parents is inclusive and non-judgemental. It provides support either through its own staff or through a contract with a registered support agency and ensures that birth parents are fully aware of the range of service available to them.

Contact between people affected by adoption is managed by the agency in a very helpful and efficient way.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency has a well-presented statement of purpose that contains all required information and clearly outlines its aims and objectives, and how they are to be achieved. This is underpinned by a range of policies and procedures that inform the work of the service and define its operations and practices. There is a children's guide in place but work is underway to complete an innovative approach to children's guides that is impressive in its potential.

The information provided for prospective adopters is of a very good standard and is sent in a timely way to all enquirers. It is clear that the approach to encouraging applicants is inclusive and attracts people from all sectors of the community. This is supplemented by a full and informative pack being provided to families following their approval as adopters. The promotion of equality and diversity is good.

In most areas the strategic and operational management of the agency is good - very good in some areas - and it is managed by a highly respected, suitably qualified and experienced professional. It has a staff team that is highly skilled, knowledgeable and qualified who bring a sensitive and thorough approach to the service. There is commitment to ensuring the service is efficient in its operations through effective management of workload and allocation. The manager, however, has a very full and wide range of responsibilities that are stretched at times; this is most evident in the undertaking of quality monitoring of work that should be the responsibility of other managers in children's services.

The staff are able to keep their practice and knowledge continually updated through the agency's strong commitment to development and training and the provision of opportunities for workers to expand their understanding and skills.

There is an involved and supportive senior management team; this is supplemented by an involved executive that is kept fully informed of the agency's work and strategic direction.

The administration of the service has been somewhat stretched in recent times and, although efficiency has been maintained in most areas, there are shortfalls to be addressed. Case records are generally well maintained and are easy to locate information; there is, however, an inconsistent approach to auditing and monitoring of files and the recording of casework supervision. Personnel records and adoption panel members' records were incomplete. Security and administrative systems, nevertheless, are well organised.

The premises are in a suitable location and are accessible to the public, including those with a disability. The working environment is fit for purpose and is reasonably well resourced.

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):

- produce Children's Permanence Reports that are consistent in their presentation and contain all necessary information. NMS 5.
- produce a policy and procedure for the functions of the adoption panel that reflects current legislation. NMS 10
- include, in recruitment and selection procedures, a facility for applicants to disclose any convictions on the application form. NMS 19.
- produce life-story work in a consistently timely manner. NMS 8
- record clearly all supervision decisions on case files. NMS 25.
- monitor and audit administrative records, in particular case records, regularly and consistently. NMS 27
- include all required information in staff and adoption panel members personnel records. NMS 28.