

Hartlepool Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Sean White / Dennis Bradley
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Date of last inspection	18/10/2005

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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 satisfactory.

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

The agency's core business, the recruitment, preparation and assessment of adopters to be suitable parents for children requiring adoptive families, is undertaken with skill, thoroughness and commitment. Similarly, the arrangements for supporting people affected by adoption, including birth parents, are undertaken in a conscientious and focused way that provides an inclusive approach.

The service works in close cooperation with children's social workers. This has created a strong approach to the development of life-story work, and preparation for adoption.

The areas that the agency performs least well is in respect of strategic and organisational management. The adoption team does not have a permanent manager and has not had for some time. This has led to some infrastructure issues not being addressed.

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency has made some improvements since the last inspection three years ago, adoption support services and inclusion of birth parents in particular. There have also been improvements in respect of IT systems and the development of policies and procedures. However, there were several issues raised following the last inspection that still have not been addressed, notably in respect of the adoption panel, including members' records, the children's guide, training and monitoring.

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.

The agency has a written strategy in place that informs its approach to recruiting adopters. It is appropriate for the service's needs and clearly outlines objectives. The agency has a good record in respect of placing children with the most appropriate families and there have been no disruptions in recent times. There is a careful and thorough approach to ensuring the most suitable placements are made. Adoption workers and children's social workers operate in a well established and cooperative way to achieve these. The quality of children's permanence reports, however, varies widely. This impacts on the depth of information provided to the adoption panel and prospective families and is insufficient in some instances. The agency does not routinely gather information about birth parents' health, which limits the range of information gathered about a child's history.

The agency's approach to the preparation and assessment of prospective adopters is carried out with thoroughness, skill, knowledge and understanding. This, the core business of the agency, is its strongest element and it is clear that managers and workers demonstrate a full and rigorous approach to the assessment process. Professional insight into and an understanding of the importance of analytical assessments of people's ability to parent children is evident, as is a strong motivation and commitment to providing for children's futures in the best possible families.

The adoption panel is informed by policies and procedures that provide a sound framework for the chair and members to operate within. The panel, however, is not appropriately constituted, having one less member than the required eight. This has had consequences on the panel being able to form a quorum on some occasions, leading to the cancellation of business and thereby causing delays. Panels are reasonably well managed, although there is some uncertainty in respect of roles and responsibilities. It was noted, however, that this has been addressed by senior managers. The administration of the panel, however, is not very efficient leading to difficulties with time management that keeps people waiting. Nevertheless, the panel provides a rigorous analysis of the information presented to it and conscientiously reaches its recommendations after all members have had the opportunity to contribute to the proceedings. Decisions are timely and are made with the best interests of children as paramount.

Managers at all levels of the organisation and staff are suitable to work in an adoption agency. Recruitment practices are thorough. The workers in the adoption team demonstrated significant understanding and knowledge of adoption matters, including contemporary practice and the underpinning legislative framework. They are skilled and conscientious workers that undertake the full range of adoption responsibilities in a committed, sensitive and rigorous way. The team, however, has had several managers in recent times and does not have a permanent incumbent at the time of the inspection and has not had for several months.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

There is a strong approach to supporting adoptive placements. Workers are committed to maintaining and promoting placements and achieve this by a range of means. They work closely with children's social workers during introductions, which sets a positive tone on which to manage and support families. Cooperative working is a strong feature of the agency that continues to promote positive support throughout the placement and after an adoption order is made if necessary. Support groups are available to adopters, arranged both by the agency and external partners, to enable people to have access to whichever level of support they may need. Support groups available also take into consideration the issues of diversity and difference. Support resources also include professional services that provides responsive, expert input whenever necessary.

The agency has very strong, professional medical advice that is available to the adoption panel, the agency, adopters and children; there are also positive relationships with other health and specialist services that provide a wide range of support opportunities.

There is also legal advice provided by the authority.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency promotes the importance of working with birth parents and encourages their involvement in the planning for their children. Their views, wishes and feelings are routinely explored and clearly recorded in children's permanence reports, wishes and feelings wherever possible, practical and in the child's best interests are taken into consideration when making arrangements.

Birth parents are all provided with the facility to access support from an established adoption support agency, with which the adoption service has a contract. Serious efforts are made to encourage birth parents to take advantage of this service and the agency monitors the provision and value for money.

There is a strong and committed approach to maintaining children's histories and backgrounds. This is achieved through a conscientious approach to ensuring that adopted children have their heritage explored and recorded as much as possible. Life-story work is undertaken in respect of all children placed for adoption and there is a protocol in place that ensures that all children have a life story book before they are adopted.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The agency is governed by a statement of purpose and it operates within the framework of a detailed set of policies and procedures that are, in the main, up to date and relevant to the service. The exception to these being the corporate safeguarding procedures that do not address the protection of children in adoption placements, or those receiving adoption support. The statement of purpose, however, has not been reviewed in recent times and some of the information is out of date. The children's guide to adoption, although reasonable in content, is a generic 'off the shelf' publication, has not been produced or commissioned by the agency and provides no specific information about the services provided.

The material provided for people enquiring about adoption is sent out in a timely way. It is informative and provides a broad outline of adoption and how the agency undertakes its responsibilities; some details are not included, but these are covered in initial discussions with agency staff.

The adoption team does not have a permanent manager in post and has not had for some time; there have been several incumbents in recent times and this has had a negative impact on service development. Temporary arrangements have enabled the core work of the service to be conducted to a generally good standard, but time commitments have severely limited the attention to detail in the wider context. In particular, the arrangements for monitoring the service overall and the more detailed auditing and monitoring of operational matters are limited. The agency has not kept the executive informed by twice yearly reports, nor is there any routine auditing or recording of supervision decisions on case files. The constitution of the adoption panel has not been addressed.

Nevertheless, the arrangements for getting the core work done are reasonably well managed. This includes fair and balanced allocation and workload management, support and supervision of social workers and a commitment to best outcomes for children drives this. However, overall the service is conducted in a limited way with no strategic planning in place.

Knowledge and skill development is encouraged and workers have opportunities to attend a range of training events. There is no strategic plan in place, however, that indicated developmental and training needs although plans are in place to organise a rolling programme of compulsory development training that should address this.

The administrative processes and systems are reasonably efficient in most areas and

adequate business support is provided for the agency, although it is evident that at times the administration support is somewhat stretched. Case records are generally well ordered and contain most required information, but there is no routine auditing mechanism in place. Access to records is governed by policies and procedures that meet confidentiality and data protection requirements.

The agency's personnel section maintains staff records to a good standard, with all required information in place, but the records in respect of adoption panel members do not contain all necessary information.

The premises used by the agency are located close to the town centre and are accessible to anyone who has genuine business with the service, including people with a disability. The offices are suitable for conducting the business of an adoption agency and are suitably equipped. An imminent move to a different location is planned that will place the adoption service in different premises to other social workers and which is less accessible to the public. These premises were not inspected.

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
5	obtain, so far as is practicable, information about the health of children's birth parents (Regulation 16(2))	01/12/2008
11	recruit sufficient numbers of people to the adoption panel to achieve the required constitution (Regulation 3)	01/12/2008
1	prepare a Statement of Purpose that includes all required information, review and revise it as appropriate and notify Ofsted of any revisions made (Regulations 2 & 4)	01/12/2008
1	prepare a children's guide to adoption that includes all required information (Regulation 3)	01/12/2008
17	prepare a child protection policy and procedure that addresses the safeguarding of children in adoptive placements and children receiving adoption support services (Regulation 9)	01/12/2008
23	develop a training programme that meets the development needs of the service (Regulation 12)	01/12/2008
28	include all required information in adoption panel members' records. (Regulation 15)	01/12/2008

Recommendations

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

- develop a consistent approach to the writing of Children's Permanence Reports to ensure adopters receive all necessary information about children being considered for a match (NMS 5)
- ensure panel administrative systems are efficient to ensure all reports are received by panel members in sufficient time (NMS 12)
- provide the executive with reports on the activity of the service twice every year (NMS 17)
- place on all case files of adopters the decisions reached in supervision (NMS 25)
- develop a system for auditing case files. (NMS 27)