

Sheffield 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

Sheffield City Council adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with adoption. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters. The service works closely with children's social workers within the authority to ensure that children are matched with suitable adoptive families. Currently the agency places children with its own approved adopters and those approved by other agencies. The Council commissions a service from a local voluntary adoption agency for those wishing to adopt from overseas.

The agency provides support for adoption placements. Post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption is provided, including birth records counselling and intermediary work. The service operates a letter box system to support contact between adopted children and their birth parents. Support is provided to birth families both by the service itself and through a contract with a voluntary adoption agency.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced inspection of the fostering agency. The purpose of the inspection was to assess the agency's compliance with the Adoption national minimum standards. All the standards were inspected under the four outcome areas of staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and organisation. All areas were judged as good.

Sheffield City Council adoption service is child focussed and places children's needs at the centre of all its adoption work. It provides rigorous assessment and preparation for prospective adopters to ensure they are suitable and equipped to adopt, although the assessment of household safety is not robust enough. Matching is careful and a good range of support services to adopters and children is provided. The adoption panels are very thorough and engage in careful deliberations about cases presented to them. On occasions, their thoroughness leads them to offering advice to the agency outside that permitted in the regulations. Equality and diversity are high priorities for the agency and evident throughout its planning, matching and assessment processes.

The agency makes considerable efforts to engage birth parents in the care planning process and enable them to contribute to their child's future. The agency has worked hard to ensure that life-story work is effective and generally timely. Support for birth parents is very good.

The service is managed very effectively and efficiently and significant development and improvements of the adoption service have occurred since the last inspection. Strategic and operational planning and development is very effective and provides a framework of ongoing improvement. Day-to-day processes are efficient but some information for adopters and children is not as good as it could be. Both the management and staff team have considerable knowledge and experience in adoption.

Improvements since the last inspection

The adoption service has made significant improvements since the last inspection and has acted on all the actions required and recommendations made at that inspection. This has resulted in the current effective service provided.

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.

This adoption service has an effective approach to meeting the needs of children through adoption. The aims of the service clearly focus on providing adopters that are well matched and appropriate for the needs of the children who need families. Adoption workers and children's social workers work well together to ensure that introductions and placements are managed well. Information sharing is effective and systems operate to ensure that the required actions take place. For example, the agency shows a commitment to ensuring that life-story work is completed for children being adopted and the state of readiness of this is monitored by panel and independent reviewing officers as well as service managers. The robustness of the agency's approach to matching is further strengthened by the excellent medical advice available and the recent commitment to life appreciation days by which families are able to understand the backgrounds of children. Effective work is being done to develop the quality of written information in Child Permanence Reports by providing examples of good practice, training and mentoring.

The agency is very thorough and careful in the way it recruits, prepares, assesses and approves people who are suitable to adopt children. The preparation and assessment process is thorough and well organised. The agency provides good preparation training, and assessment reports are clear and evaluative in nature. Systems are in place to prioritise those families who are able to offer something particular to the service. For example, the recruitment of adopters for sibling groups, older children, children from dual heritage backgrounds and children with disabilities is a priority for the service. The agency only approves families that are capable of

and suitable to look after and meet the needs of children requiring adoption. Whilst most aspects of the assessment process are thorough, the health and safety checklist in respect of applicants' homes is limited in scope and does not assess a wide enough range of factors. Checks on the suitability of applicants and their families, including those with the Criminal Records Bureau, local authorities, and references from family members and friends, are robust and careful.

The authority's adoption panels are rigorous and focussed in their scrutiny of the work of the agency and as such, further support the quality of the work. Panels are appropriately constituted, managed and operate within clear procedures and principles. Medical and professional advice provided to panel is of an exceptionally high quality and administrative systems are very effective and timely. This means that panels are able to undertake their deliberations in full knowledge of the circumstances of each case. Panels are robust in ensuring that good quality work is done to consider whether children should be placed for adoption, assessments of prospective adopters and matches between children and adopters. Panels deliberate carefully on every case and demonstrate very high professional standards. However, this often leads to a panel offering advice to the agency outside that permitted by the regulations. Decision making is undertaken conscientiously and with a clear focus on ensuring that all information is available to come to a conclusion. Decisions are timely and clear arrangements are in place to manage any situation in which the decision maker may disagree with a panel's recommendation.

The service is managed by a suitably qualified person who has been appointed to the adoption service within the last year. In this time, clear improvements are evident in the structures underpinning the way the service is operated that demonstrate the manager's skills. The agency's social workers and other staff are qualified and very experienced, and demonstrate a deep and clear understanding of adoption matters, current practice and legislation. The staff recruitment practices are very thorough and ensure that staff members are suitable people to work with vulnerable children and a great deal of confidential information.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency's strategy and arrangements for supporting adoptive placements are strong. It provides a range of flexible and individually tailored support strategies that help adoptive families to settle children into placements. Support provided can range from informal support from workers to more complex work including therapeutic input if needed.

The agency provides a range of support groups and activities for adoptive adults and their birth and adopted children. Newsletters are produced and information provided about other support and resources available. The authority's developing focus on the importance of children's secure attachments is evident and the emphasis during assessment and matching on the importance of adopters promoting children's sense of identity and history, helps provide stable and permanent homes for children. The

letterbox arrangements for maintaining contact between adopted children and their birth families are managed appropriately. Post adoption support, including birth records counselling is based on effective arrangements and procedures that ensure support is available when requested and of good quality.

Specialist advice and support resources are readily accessible. Medical advice and support provided to the agency is of outstanding quality and with three full time medical advisers in post, it is readily available to inform all areas of adoption decision making and to support adoptive families. Legal advice is always provided at panel whenever children are being considered for adoption. Other resources and specialist services are sourced whenever necessary.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The adoption service shows a clear commitment to supporting people who have been affected by adoption, including birth families. A range of services are available to support birth families provided by the adoption service itself, as well as some contracted from an independent service. The adoption agency runs a support group for the birth families of adopted children. It also provides the opportunity, regularly accessed, for birth parents to 'pop in' to the agency and a telephone help-line for individual support.

The agency encourages birth parents to be involved as far as possible in the planning for their children's future. Despite the difficulties involved in seeking the views of birth parents, the authority works hard to include their opinions. For example, meetings between birth and adoptive parents and the involvement of birth families in life-appreciation days are supported where this is appropriate and helpful. The adoption service works closely with birth parents to establish and maintain good and supportive relationships with them. The development of these relationships helps in the collecting and compiling of information for life-story work and adoption preparation.

The agency places a high priority on life-story work being completed for children being adopted. A significant commitment and effort has been made in this work with social workers, support workers and foster carers being involved in its development. The commitment of the agency is evident in the improving picture in the authority of the quality and timeliness of this work over the last year. The completeness of this work is monitored at several stages of the adoption process to ensure it is available as soon as possible to support the placement.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency's preparation for this inspection was very efficient and of a very high standard. This demonstrates a commitment and ability to organise and manage well.

The organisation has a very comprehensive Statement of Purpose in place which accurately sets out the service it provides. Its policies and procedures are of good quality and are being reviewed and improved further. The procedures that have been recently reviewed are of excellent quality and provide a very effective framework for the operation of the service.

The agency has a children's guide that is very informative and produced in a manner that is attractive to older children. However, the content and style of this guide is not accessible or meaningful for younger children who form the majority of children adopted. The agency has effective procedures regarding the recruitment of adoptive parents that set out its eligibility criteria and prioritise the sorts of adopters who can best meet the needs of the children needing families. An information pack for prospective adopters is available but this is not very welcoming in presentation and does not contain sufficiently detailed or clear information for enquirers.

The management of the service, at both strategic and operational levels, is very good with evidence of the recent significant development of the agency and the quality of its work. There is a very clear understanding of how adoption fits into the overall context of children's social care. Effective management and planning processes continue to promote further development and improvement. The direct operational management of the service is extremely effective with a real priority being placed upon the welfare of children. The quality of the overall management of the agency is particularly impressive when seen against the significant changes of personnel throughout the line management of the adoption service over the last year.

Management and support for staff is of good quality and is undertaken with a clear understanding of the agency's priorities and responsibilities. Workload management is effective and the agency is taking appropriate steps to further develop its capacity by the recruitment of additional staff and an internal restructuring of how its services are provided. The service is well planned and the quality of its work is effectively monitored. The agency provides its staff with very good support. Training and development opportunities for staff are good and a priority is placed on disseminating good practice. Effective work is carried out and further work planned to ensure that field social work staff are kept informed about adoption matters and supported in carrying out their roles.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good.

The agency is committed to providing a service that values and supports people's differences. This is underpinned by its policies and practice. The agency focuses on the specific needs of children when considering matches with adopters. Children's

needs arising from their ethnicity, religion, culture or disability are carefully considered and recruitment of adopters is prioritised to reflect needs of children awaiting adoptive placements. Good support is provided for children who need therapeutic services. The agency is non-discriminatory in the way it considers the suitability of people to adopt. For example, it looks creatively at how people with a disability can be supported to adopt and parent children rather than seeing disability as a barrier to adoption.

Case recording is thorough and reflects the work undertaken. The agency is currently operating a mixture of paper and electronic records as part of its change to the Integrated Children’s System of recording. As a consequence, records are not always as well structured as they could be but do contain a clear record of the work carried out with children and adopters. Effective supervision takes place with clear records retained on files of all decisions taken and of the quality of recording being monitored.

Personnel records and those in respect of adoption panel members are maintained to a high standard and other administrative records are of good quality and regularly monitored.

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
10	ensure that adoption panels only advise the agency on the matters set out in the regulations (Regulations 18(3), 26(3) and 32(3) of the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005).	06/02/2009

Recommendations

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

- improve the range of the health and safety checklist to ensure that premises are fully checked for all eventualities (NMS 4.6)
- produce a children's guide that is suitable for and accessible to young children (NMS 1.4)
- develop the information pack for adopters to contain more detailed and explanatory information that is presented in a more accessible and welcoming

format (NMS 3.1).