

Knowsley MBC 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

Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council 's adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters. The service also undertakes the approval of non-agency adopters.

In addition, the service 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. The service operates and maintains a letter box system, which supports the exchange of information in adoption placements.

The Council has commissioned a similar service for inter-country adopters from a local voluntary adoption agency.

An independent counselling and support service is also provided to birth parents, their families and adopted adults through commissioning arrangements with a voluntary adoption agency.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This was an announced inspection. All the Adoption National Minimum Standards (NMS) were addressed under the four outcome areas of staying safe, enjoying and achieving, positive contribution and organisation. Both staying safe and organisation were judged as satisfactory; whilst enjoying and achieving and positive contribution were judged as good.

Knowsley 's adoption service is child focussed and in the main, is thorough in its approach to the recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters. However, improvements in the assessment process, as well as in the assessments of adopters is required. This is also true in respect of the children's written assessments. The robust activities of the adoption staff, panel and specialist advisers ensure all necessary information is obtained. This assists the matching process and enables the effective matching of children with adopters. A range of support services to adopters is provided, both pre and post order, ensuring families are provided with the necessary support to maintain stable and permanent adoptive homes.

The service fully recognises the lifelong implications of adoption and the importance of maintaining a child's heritage. Every effort is made to engage birth parents in the care planning process and enable them to contribute to their child's future. This

greatly assists in ensuring children have a well recorded background. However, whilst life work is undertaken, this work is not always completed in a timely manner. There is a robust and well managed letterbox system and assistance with letterbox contact is available. A counselling and intermediary service is provided to adopted adults and birth relatives. All those affected by the adoption process are respected, valued and receive an individually tailored service.

Both the management and staff team have knowledge and experience in adoption. However, the service is not resourced sufficiently to ensure the development of the service and efficient service delivery. The service's quality assurance systems are also not sufficiently robust, particularly in relation to the panel members and agency records. The children's guide does not contain all the information required by the Adoption Agencies Regulations.

Improvements since the last inspection

Knowsley 's last full inspection was carried out in November 2005, which resulted in 10 actions and 21 recommendations being made. In June 2007, a visit was made to the adoption service to follow up these actions and recommendations.

The service had made considerable efforts to address these matters, with the result that there was only one action and two recommendations, which remained outstanding. The action related to the service's children's guide, which did not contain all the required regulatory information. The two outstanding recommendations were in relation to the development of a strategy for working with birth parents and their families and the development of a disaster recovery plan. However, an additional recommendation was made in this follow up visit, which related to the revision of the safeguarding policy.

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 service has an effective recruitment strategy which is based on an awareness of the needs of children requiring adoption. Children are matched with adopters who best meet their assessed needs. There is evidence of consideration being given to children's ethnic, cultural and religious needs in identifying the most appropriate placement. There is a focus on placing children with their brothers and sisters unless this will not meet their individual needs. The service has successfully placed older children. Children are being placed within twelve months of the decision that they should be placed for adoption.

There are clear processes and procedures in place to handle domestic adoption enquiries and follow up any expressions of interest, which are compatible with the agency's equal opportunities and anti-discriminatory practice guidance. Inter- country adopters are referred to a voluntary adoption agency, which Knowsley has commissioned, to provide this specialist service. Adopters confirmed that they had received 'useful' information regarding the adoption process, which effectively met their needs.

A formal process is in place for the preparation, assessment and approval of adopters. However, following initial visits, agency records do not evidence that the counselling stage has been carried out, nor is the suitability decision recorded. Applications are also taken after preparation courses have commenced. Preparation training is provided jointly with foster carers and prospective adopters with the last session being specific to each group. There was a mixed view about this training, with some adopters extremely positive about the groups, stating that they were well organised, the materials well presented, 'the training helped us understand the adoption process and really made us think'. However, others stated that there was too much concentration on foster care and they felt there was a lack of guidance on post adoption support. Second time adopters also attend the same groups and several indicated that they had not found them very useful.

Adopters' assessments are generally of a good standard, in so far as they are thorough, analytical and cover such issues as parenting capacity, life experiences, the impact of adoption and support networks well. Views of birth and adopted children are also obtained regarding their parents' decision to adopt. However, not all assessments are of this standard, for example, in one assessment there was insufficient exploration of an applicant's life experiences and likely impact on their parenting capacity. There was evidence that the service obtains written references in relation to the adopters, employer references and checks with applicants' former partners. However, in some files, records of visits to personal referees were brief and did not include exploration of all the relevant issues. 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 agency ensures adopters are able to look after children in a safe manner through the use of a comprehensive health and safety checklist.

Adopters were positive about their experience of the assessment process, stating that the assessments had been carried out by professional, skilled and sensitive staff. Some adopters though were unhappy about the length of time it had taken to complete the assessments. However, adopters were extremely positive about the accuracy and realism of the report, which had been given 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. This information is reinforced to adopters through out the adoption process.

The adoption service is child focussed and every effort is made to ensure children are matched with adopters, who best meet their assessed needs. Staff work hard to improve the quality of information provided for adopters and training regarding the child permanence report (CPR) has been provided. Despite this, the CPRs are of variable quality, with some containing comprehensive information, whilst others lack such detail, for example, not all included the wishes and feelings of the child or that of birth parents and family members. In others, contact arrangements are not always correct or clear. Physical and personality descriptions of parents are sometimes limited, even where the service knows them well. However, the involvement of adoption staff, panel and specialist advisers in the matching process has ensured supplementary information is obtained. This has enhanced and informed the matching and decision making process.

Panel policies and procedures are in place which meet the NMS and Regulations. Prospective adopters attend panel and an information leaflet is provided to them. Adopters commented that the panel was welcoming and asked appropriate and relevant questions. Attendance was described as "daunting but positive".

The panel is properly constituted. New members have the opportunity to observe panel, induction is provided and Criminal Record Bureau checks are taken up before they commence work on the panel. The panel chairperson has considerable knowledge in adoption and excellent chairing skills. The service provides training for panel members and is working to recruit new members, who reflect the diversity of the local area. The Panel is convened according to Regulations, avoids delays and is efficiently. Panel papers are received well in advance of meetings and the minutes are accurate.

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. Notifications of the decision are always sent out within the necessary timescales.

The manager and staff working for the service are appropriately qualified and skilled and are experienced in adoption work. Staff recruitment practices are robust.

There is a safeguarding policy and procedure, which fully meets the adoption NMS and Regulations. 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 good.

Knowsley has developed a full range of pre and post adoption support services. These services are provided in a variety of ways, for example, some services are provided in-house, whilst other are provided in partnership with a local voluntary

adoption agency or other services, such as the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).

The support services provided include financial support packages, for example, settling-in grants, adoption allowances, a regular news letter, social events and an adopters' support groups. The family support worker within the adoption team also provides guidance and assistance to adopters and children in writing letters, under letterbox agreements. In addition, they have the opportunity to access a helpline, counselling service and other support groups through commissioning arrangements with a local voluntary adoption agency. Internal and external training is also provided.

There are good working relationships between the adoption service and other Council services. This has resulted in adopters accessing a variety of specialist services to meet specific needs, for example, accessing and obtaining additional educational support for a child. There is also an effective system to access services from the CAHMS. In certain circumstances, the service will also, if necessary, commission individual therapy for an adoptive family.

Inter-country adopters are also able to access Knowsley 's support services, as well as those provided by the commissioned voluntary adoption agency.

Adopters are made aware of the support services available, at an early stage in their contact with the agency. Written information is also provided to adopters. However, there were a small number of adopters, who indicated that they were unaware of the financial support available to them. Adoption support plans are generally of a good standard and these plans are reviewed, where ever necessary. Any requests for support are responded to 'promptly' and adopters indicated that they were 'well supported'. Adopters, who had not required support, stated that they were confident should such support be required in the future, it would be provided.

The service has access to specialist advisors and services, including medical and legal advisors who are committed to achieving positive outcomes for children through adoption. Social workers and adopters were complimentary about their contacts with specialist advisors. Written protocols are in place.

There are appropriate systems in place for people affected by adoption to receive specific services according to assessed need. These services are provided in a thoughtful, sensitive manner and people are fully involved in any decisions affecting their life.

The adoption service ensures any service commissioned by them is supported by a written agreement. This agreement is regularly reviewed to ensure 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 is committed to working with birth parents and encourages them to be as fully involved as possible, in planning for their children's future. At times their cooperation is difficult to maintain, however, it is clear that every effort is made to overcome these difficulties and to engage birth parents in this care planning process. Views of birth parents are sought, however, these are not always recorded in the CPRS.

Knowsley has a contract with a voluntary adoption agency to offer independent support and counselling to birth parents and families. Written information regarding this service is provided at various stages of the adoption process and efforts are made to ensure support is provided at an early stage, for example, when an adoption plan is being considered for their child. The service is accessible to birth parents and their families at any time and the work is carried out in a thoughtful and sensitive manner. This contract is carefully monitored to ensure that it provides a qualitative service and value for money.

The adoption service also provides an opportunity for the birth and adoptive parents to meet. This enables adopters to receive information from the birth parents, first hand and can provide them, with a firm basis for future contact arrangements. These meetings are carefully prepared, sensitively handled and well managed.

Knowsley has a commitment to gathering information about children's backgrounds and encouraging birth families to contribute to their child's heritage. They also recognise the importance of ensuring life work is undertaken with a child and use such work to prepare a child for adoption. However, such work, including the production of life story books, are not always carried out in timely manner.

There are a limited number of direct contact arrangements, however, the service will provide adopters with support, where the arrangements are difficult or complex. Arrangements for indirect contact are managed through the letter box system. This is a robust system, which is managed in an effective and efficient manner. In addition to this, the agency provides a birth records counselling service. Experiences and learning derived from this work is used to inform adoption practice.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

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. Recruitment of adopters is prioritised to reflect needs of children awaiting adoptive placements. 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. Good support is provided for children who need therapeutic services. The agency is non-discriminatory in considering the suitability of people to adopt.

The adoption service is carried out its various tasks and responsibilities effectively and efficiently. Its statement of purpose (SOP) is up-to-date and clearly details its aims, objectives and the services provided. This document is supported by a range of policies and procedures, which informs and underpins the operations and strategic direction of the agency.

The service's children's guide can be produced in a variety of formats to meet children's differing needs. The guide is attractively presented, written in a child friendly form and contains nearly all the information required. However, it does not contain the name, address and telephone number of the children's rights director.

Adopters are provided with clear, well written, comprehensive information about the adoption process, which is sent out in a timely way. The service's literature indicates that people who are interested in becoming adoptive parents will be welcomed without prejudice. This is clearly reflected in their practice, as shown in the diversity of their adopters. A system is in place to prioritise the assessment of prospective adopters, who are most likely to meet the needs of children waiting to be adopted, which is effectively communicated to adopters.

The service has been managed by the Service Manager, who has a wide range of responsibilities, until the appointment of a temporary adoption team manager. The temporary adoption team manager has appropriate skills, qualifications and experience. Staff spoke positively about both these managers, whom they stated had been very supportive to them. Roles and lines of responsibility are clear.

There are a number of quality assurance systems in place to monitor the agency's performance. There are regular reports and meetings with elected members, which reflect their active corporate parenting role. Service managers also carefully monitor progress for under 10 year olds, where permanency decisions have been made and tracking meetings are held to discuss and monitor progress. The Adoption and permanency's panel's role in quality assurance is clear. However, whilst quality assurance at the strategic levels of the adoption service are robust, this is not the case at the operational level and some improvements are required.

The agency's staff are clear about their roles, the lines of accountability and

communication is good. Staff have knowledge, experience and skills in working with children and in adoption. They are encouraged and supported in their work. Staff acknowledged they receive regular supervision, both on an informal and formal basis. Administrative support is of a good standard and supports staff to carry out their work efficiently. However, despite the use of sessional workers and additional support provided by workers in other services, the lack of permanent staff, experienced and skilled in adoption has had a significant impact on the development and delivery of service.

Similarly, whilst staff spoke positively about the range and quality of the training and professional development opportunities provided; capacity issues within the service were such that they had been unable to take advantage of many of the opportunities provided.

There are appropriate policies and procedures in place for case recording. Case records are well organised and maintained. However, in some files, the case records are not legible, nor signed or dated by the author and manager. There is also some inconsistency in supervisors' decisions being recorded on file. Some case records also breached confidentiality, as they contain names of other children.

The overall administration is efficient, well managed and appropriately structured to provide support to a busy agency. Administrative records are well maintained and stored in a confidential, secure manner.

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. The service regularly samples files and an audit tool is in place, however, this tool is not consistently used in files and requires improvement, for example, there was no indication of the remedial action taken, when necessary.

Personnel and Panel Members' files are well ordered and securely stored. Staff recruitment practices are robust. However, the panel members' files do not contain all the required information, for example, some panel members' files, where relevant, did not contain a full employment history and in some files, there was no documentary evidence of relevant qualifications.

The premises are very well resourced. There is space, storage, good information technology equipment and communication systems. The premises are accessible, have sufficient parking and are fit for purpose.

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))	01/04/2009
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))	01/04/2009
28	ensure all the required information relating to the adoption service's panel members are obtained (Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003, 11(3)(d)).	01/04/2009

Recommendations

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

- ensure the application for the assessment of adopters is completed prior to the preparation training (NMS 4)
- ensure prospective adopters' assessments are of a consistent qualitative standard (NMS 4)
- improve the quality of child permanence reports (NMS 5)
- ensure life work and the production of a life story book is completed in a timely manner (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, for example, case records are signed and dated by the author and all supervision decisions recorded on file (NMS 25 and 27).