

St Helens Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

Unique reference number	SC056872
Inspection date	08/01/2009
Inspector	Marian Denny / Stephen Smith
Type of inspection	Key

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Date of last inspection	17/01/2006

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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

St Helens 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, birth families, adopters and adopted adults through commissioning arrangements with a voluntary adoption agency.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The 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, which were judged as good.

The adoption service's practice is child focussed. It is thorough in its approach to the recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters and makes every effort to ensure children are kept safe. Considerable care and thought is given to the effective matching of children and adopters. A good range of accessible, support services are provided to adopters, both pre and post adoption order. These services enable families to receive the necessary support, so they can provide their children with a permanent and stable home.

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 recruitment and quality assurance systems are not sufficiently robust, particularly in relation to the panel members and agency records. The children's guide also does not contain all the information required by the Adoption Agencies Regulations.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last full inspection was carried out on 17 January 2006 and resulted in three actions and 13 recommendations being made. However, the service had made considerable efforts to address these matters, with the result there was only one action and two recommendations, which remained outstanding. The action related to the panel members' files, which did not contain all the required regulatory information. The two outstanding recommendations were in relation to the telephone verification of personnel and panel members' written references and agency records.

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.

St Helens' adoption service has a good, effective recruitment strategy, which is based on an awareness of children requiring adoption. Its successful recruitment campaigns have resulted in a diverse range of adopters being recruited, resulting in more placement choice for children. Consequently, older children, children with disabilities and large sibling groups have been effectively matched and placed with adoptive families.

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 St Helens has commissioned to provide this specialist service. Adopters confirmed that the information they had received regarding the adoption process was useful and had met their needs.

The service has a thorough preparation, assessment and approval process of adopters. Preparation training is provided regularly and the materials used are fit within a framework of equal opportunities and address anti-discriminatory practice. Preparation training is tailored to meet the varying needs of adopters. The service

has also made arrangements for those wishing to adopt a child from overseas to attend inter-country preparation groups, which are provided in collaboration with another adoption agency.

Adopters' assessments are 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. There was evidence that the service obtains written references in relation to the adopters, employer references and checks with applicants' former partners. 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, knowledgeable and skilled staff. Adopters were also 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's practice is child focussed. It's thorough approach to matching, ensures children are matched with adopters, who best meet their needs. Adopters are fully informed about the matching process and provided with full information about the child being placed. In situations, where a child has complex needs, adopters are given the opportunity to meet with relevant professionals to gain a greater understanding of these needs. Matching meetings are well recorded and informative, should any adult adoptee subsequently seek access to their records. Similarly, the introductions and placement of children with adopters are also robust and well managed. The thoroughness of all these processes provide a good foundation for the stability of the adoption placement and are a significant factor in the service's very low rate of disruptions.

The adoption panel has a clear written set of policies and procedures which govern its function and operation. There is a well established practice of adopters being invited to attend the panel. The panel is appropriately constituted and arranged at a frequency that avoids any delay in considering the approval of prospective adopters. It is well organised and chaired. Panel members are well prepared, make appropriate observations and ask relevant questions. Panel minutes are generally informative, reflect the discussion, however, in some panel minutes the reasons for the recommendations are not comprehensive.

Adopters are invited to attend the adoption panel and good preparatory work is generally undertaken with them prior to their attendance. Adopters stated that the

chairperson and panel members 'welcomed' them and 'put them at ease'. However, the panel members' friendliness, does not detract from their thoroughness in considering the matters before them. Adopters stated the questions asked were 'relevant' and 'appropriate'.

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 all staff working within the adoption service are appropriately qualified, skilled and experienced in their work. In the main, staff recruitment practices are robust, however, the system used to verify written references by telephone is not consistently managed.

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.

The adoption service has developed a full range of pre and post adoption support services. These services are provided in a variety of ways, for example, in-house, through collaborative work with three neighbouring authorities; whilst others 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, with a no detriment element for foster carers, an adopters' support group, an annual news letter and social event. The adoption support worker within the adoption team, also provides guidance and assistance to adopters and children in writing letters, as agreed 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, fast track 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 St Helens' 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. 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.

There are written protocols in place in relation to specialist advisors. The agency has access to a variety of specialist advisors and services, including medical and legal advisors who are committed to achieving positive outcomes for children through adoption. Both social workers and adopters were complimentary about their contacts with them.

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 it commissions is supported by a written agreement. This contract is regularly reviewed to ensure the required qualitative standard for the service and service users' needs are met.

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, the agency makes every effort to overcome these difficulties and engage birth parents in this care planning process. Views of birth parents are sought and recorded in the child permanence reports.

St Helens 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, with efforts 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.

St Helens 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 good.

The adoption service carries out its various tasks and responsibilities effectively and efficiently. The statement of purpose 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 has its own children's guide for younger children, which can be produced in a variety of formats to meet children's differing needs. This guide is attractively presented, written in a child friendly form and contains nearly all the information required. However, the summary of complaints is not sufficiently developed and 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 management of the adoption service is undertaken by people who are appropriately qualified and have the necessary background, knowledge and skills in adoption. They demonstrate a clear understanding of their roles, their responsibilities and are committed to the service. Staff speak positively about them and indicate that they provide effective leadership of the adoption service.

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. The managerial team also discuss and

carefully monitor the progress of children, where permanency decisions have been made. The Adoption and permanency 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 always the case at the operational level, for example, the breach of confidentiality in relation to agency records.

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 and qualitative supervision, both on an informal and formal basis. Administrative support is of a good standard and supports staff to carry out their work efficiently. The adoption service, with the exception of post adoption work, has sufficient staff resources to undertake the range of work required. The service though has produced a development plan to address this, which has been fully supported by the Senior Management Team. Staff spoke positively of the range of training and professional development opportunities provided them, which they state are of a good standard.

There are appropriate policies and procedures in place for case recording. Case records are well organised and maintained. The majority contained full and up-to-date information, however, some records breach confidentiality, as they contain names of other adopters.

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.

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 does not discriminate in considering the suitability of people to adopt.

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, panel members' files, did not contain proof of identity and others, where relevant, did not contain a full employment history.

The premises are spacious with good storage facilities and are extremely well

resourced, with excellent information technology and communication systems. The premises are accessible, has 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
1	ensure the Children’s Guide contains all the required information (Regulation 3(1), Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003)	16/04/2009
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).	16/04/2009

Recommendations

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

- ensure the reasons for the panel's recommendations are fully recorded in the minutes (NMS 12)
- ensure there is evidence of the telephone verification of references (NMS 19)
- ensure that employment histories are routinely explored during the staff recruitment process (NMS 19)
- ensure that life story work and the production of a life story book is carried out in a timely way (NMS 8)
- ensure that there are no breaches of confidentiality in agency records (NMS 27).