

Darlington Borough Council

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

Unique reference number	SC067257
Inspection date	12/02/2009
Inspector	Stephen Smith / Sean White
Type of inspection	Key

Setting address	Darlington Borough Council, Town Hall, Feethams, DARLINGTON, County Durham, DL1 5QT
Telephone number	01325 388924
Email	
Registered person	Darlington Borough Council
Registered manager	Mary Sweeney
Responsible individual	Murray Rose
Date of last inspection	28/02/2006

© Crown copyright 2009

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

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

Darlington Borough Council adoption service undertakes or makes arrangements for, in partnership with a voluntary adoption agency, all statutory responsibilities in respect of the adoption of children. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of people who adopt children from this country, all of which are undertaken by the voluntary agency. The council makes its own decision, regarding whether children should be placed for adoption and decides on matches, using its own panel and decision maker. The agency provides or makes arrangements for, the support of anyone affected by adoption, including birth families and adopted adults. Adoption social workers are employed by Darlington but work part time for Darlington and part time for the voluntary adoption agency. The authority does not have formalised arrangements for assessing adopters who wish to adopt from overseas.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This was an announced inspection of the adoption 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. Outcomes for children under enjoying and achieving are rated as good. The other three areas are satisfactory.

Darlington Borough Council's adoption service places children's needs for adoptive parents at the centre of its work. It is a small authority and operates its adoption service in partnership with a voluntary adoption agency, which undertakes the approval of adopters on its behalf. Adoptions take place in a timely manner, with evidence that children are placed with adoptive parents, who are well matched to their needs. Not all recording by the agency is good enough. For example, the quality of child permanence reports and matching information is variable, some adoption files contain inappropriate information and case decisions are not clearly recorded in files. Archiving arrangements do not give records sufficient protection and all the required information about panel members is not sought and recorded in their files.

The agency makes considerable efforts to engage birth parents in the care planning process and enables them to contribute to their child's future. It provides birth parents with very good support and has developed very good working relationships with them, that assists with the adoption of their children. However, the agency has not capitalised sufficiently well on this work. Life-story work is not given sufficient priority, is generally not ready in a timely manner and is often not of good enough

quality.

Management arrangements are currently not cohesive enough, with no single manager having overall responsibility for all aspects of the service. This has allowed a lack of clarity of practice to develop, particularly in relation to inter-country adoption and work with foster carers, who wish to be considered to adopt the children they are fostering. In these areas, practice is confused and unclear. The authority has a strategic plan in place to address this matter and this demonstrates the authority's commitment to improve the adoption service provided.

Improvements since the last inspection

The adoption service has addressed all but two of the recommendations made at the last inspection. This has improved the robustness of the agency's operating procedures and its overall effectiveness. It is still not clear enough, about how it manages inter-country adoption and does not record its decision making processes well enough.

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.

This adoption service has an approach to meeting the needs of children through adoption that is generally sound. The service focuses on providing adopters that are well matched and appropriate for the needs of the children who need families. The authority works well with the voluntary agency that recruits adopters for Darlington children, to ensure that suitable adopters are recruited for the needs of children, who may need or are awaiting an adoptive family. The agency is prompt and efficient in its arrangements, with families being found in a timely manner. Adoption workers and children's social workers work well together, to ensure that introductions and placements are managed well. However, the process for considering different adopters for a child and deciding which match should be pursued and presented to the panel, is not formal enough. For example, there are no formalised and recorded matching meetings. This could reduce the range of perspectives sought, regarding the suitability of the match and would not help a child looking back in later life, to understand how decisions were made. The quality of the recording and reports about children for adoption is variable. Adoption placement reports are generally good and some child permanence reports are completed well and give clear and comprehensive information, to assist the matching process and for reference by children in later life. However, in others key issues are not explored, some sections are not fully completed or reports are not updated as needed. In some, the reason an adoptive placement is being sought is not specifically clear. This limits effective

decision making and does not help children to understand why they were adopted. The agency has provided training for social work staff in the writing of these reports.

The agency does not recruit its own adopters. These are recruited by a partner voluntary adoption agency, under the terms of a service level agreement. The authority is not clear how it makes arrangements for the assessment of people who wish to adopt from overseas and this lack of clarity may result in work that is undertaken being incorrect or illegal.

The authority's adoption panel is robust and thorough in their scrutiny of the cases presented to it. Administration arrangements for the panel are effective and 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 and matches between children and adopters. The policy and procedure in which the panel operates, contains erroneous information and does not cover all the points required by the national minimum standards. This may lead to the panel not operating as efficiently as it should. The agency's panel only has seven members, rather than the eight that is required by the regulations. A member has recently left the panel and the agency is trying to recruit an appropriate person to fill the resulting vacancy. The panel benefits from effective medical and legal advice.

The authority presents the cases of any of its foster carers, who wish to adopt a child they are fostering to its panel, to consider whether they should be assessed as adopters. This means that the panel is considering matters on which it cannot make a recommendation and are as such, out of its remit. This process also discriminates against foster carers wishing to adopt, as it represents another layer of assessment not faced by other adopters.

Decision making is undertaken in a timely, conscientious manner with a clear focus on ensuring that all information is available to come to a conclusion. 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. The agency has a clear strategic plan, to reshape the way it delivers services over the next few months. The agency's social workers and other staff are qualified, experienced and they understand adoption matters and current practice. The staff recruitment practices are 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 helps 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 has a very effective arrangement with the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), with a dedicated full time worker committed to adoption support. This allows a responsive, prompt and personalised service to be provided to children and adoptive families when needed. Examples of some very good support for children and adopters in difficult circumstances were noted, that demonstrates a creative response that coordinates input and support, from a number of different sources. Ongoing support, including newsletters, information and advice is provided to adoptive families, by the voluntary agency that works in partnership with Darlington. 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, that ensures support is available when requested and is of good quality. The agency's adoption support policy and procedure does not make clear the range of people affected by adoption, to whom services will be provided or how an assessment and support will be provided.

Specialist advice and support resources are readily accessible. Medical advice and support provided to the agency is of good quality and is readily available, to inform all areas of adoption decision making and to support adoptive families. Legal advice is provided at the panel and other resources and specialist services are sourced whenever necessary.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

The adoption service shows a clear commitment to supporting people who have been affected by adoption. It is very good indeed at providing support to birth parents, but does not translate this effectiveness into providing good life-story work for children being adopted. Agency and children's social workers provide a range of support to birth families and independent support is contracted from an independent service.

The agency encourages birth parents to be involved as far as possible in the planning for their children's future. Very high quality relationships between social work staff and birth parents are evident and the authority works hard to seek their opinions and to encourage them to provide information, to make the adoption of their children successful. For example, meetings between birth and adoptive parents 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 high quality of these relationships and the very strong work carried out in this area is not utilised to its best advantage. However, the adoption service does not give life-story work sufficient priority and this limits children's opportunities to understand their heritage, history and background. The adoption support worker has provided social workers with some training in this work and the completeness of this work is monitored by the adoption panel and independent reviewing officers. However, in most cases life-story work is not completed until after the adoption

order has been made and the quality of this work is often not good enough. Arrangements for contact are clearly set out and letterbox arrangements are effective, with support being provided to both birth and adoptive parents, regarding the information to be provided.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The organisation has a statement of purpose in place, which sets out the service it provides and makes clear its relationship with the voluntary agency, with whom it works in partnership. However, this document does not make clear how arrangements regarding inter-country adoption are made and this reflects the lack of clarity in practice in this area.

The agency has a children's guide for both younger and older children. The guide for younger children does not summarise the complaints procedure and contains some incorrect information. The guide for older children is generalised and does not contain specific information, relating to how adoption is arranged in Darlington.

The agency has effective procedures, in conjunction with its partner voluntary adoption agency, regarding the recruitment of adoptive parents. Arrangements make clear the types of adopters needed as a priority for Darlington children.

The agency works in partnership with a voluntary adoption agency that recruits and assesses adopters, under a service level agreement on behalf of Darlington Borough Council. As a consequence of this, management arrangements are complex and no single manager has complete oversight of all the adoption activity undertaken on a day to day basis. In practice, some aspects of the work are managed by the Children's Accommodation Manager and some by social work team managers. The adoption social workers are employed by Darlington Borough Council but are managed largely by the voluntary adoption agency. These arrangements have led to the lack of a cohesive management approach to the service. The authority accepts that there is a lack of clarity, regarding who has final responsibility and that clear oversight of the whole adoption process is difficult. These arrangements have contributed to the confused approach to how some parts of the service are delivered, including the assessment of foster carers wishing to adopt and inter-country adoption work. The authority has strategic plans in place to address these issues.

Management and support for staff is of good quality and workload management is effective. The agency provides its staff with good support. Training and development opportunities for staff are good. Very strong working relationships exist between

children’s social workers and the adoption agency.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. There is a statement on equal opportunities, written into the contract with the authority’s partner agency and equal opportunities is emphasised within information for adopters. Information about children’s individual needs arising from any disability, their ethnicity, culture or background, is reflected well in documents used to arrange matches between children and adopters. A careful and considered balance is made between the need to be timely in arranging adoptive placements, as well as the need to ensure that these reflect children’s ethnicity or specific needs. However, the agency’s arrangements for dealing with inter-country adoptions are not robust enough and the process for considering whether foster carers should be able to apply to adopt the children they are caring for discriminates against them.

Case recording is thorough and reflects the work undertaken. Records are not always as well structured as they could be, but they do contain a clear record of the work carried out with children and adopters. The agency has a satisfactory policy regarding the contents of files. However, this procedure is not always followed in practice. Children’s adoption files are not closed at the time the order is made and they contain confidential third party information that should not be retained. Files do not contain evidence of the decisions taken, regarding the adoption of children and as such, do not demonstrate a clear decision making process. Archived adoption files are not backed up in any way and they are not stored in a manner that protects them sufficiently from fire.

Personnel records and other administrative records are of good quality. Files of panel members are not as well maintained. Most panel members started their duties on the panel of the voluntary adoption agency partner of the authority. When the council took over the operation of a panel to consider ‘should be placed for adoption’ and matching decisions, panel members continued their roles as panel members for the council. At this time, status and reference checks on panel members, should have been redone on behalf of the council as the panel was in fact, a new body. These checks have not been done for those members that transferred.

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	ensure that child permanence reports consistently cover all the matters required by regulation to a sufficiently high standard	22/05/2009

	(Reg 17 of the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005)	
11	ensure the adoption panel is constituted in line with the regulations (Reg 3(3) of the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005)	22/05/2009
12	ensure the adoption panel only considers cases about which it is able to make a recommendation (Reg 26(1) of the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005)	27/03/2009
1	develop a children’s guide covering the matters listed in Schedule 2 (Reg 3(1) of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003)	22/05/2009
28	ensure that the information set out in Schedule 3 is obtained for all panel members (Reg 11 of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003)	24/04/2009
25	ensure that adopters and children’s records are at all times kept in conditions to protect them from destruction or damage (Reg 39 of the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005).	24/04/2009

Recommendations

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

- develop a formal and clearly recorded process for considering prospective adopters for children and deciding upon the identified match to be presented to panel (NMS 2)
- develop and implement effective procedures for the assessment and approval of inter-country adopters (NMS 4)
- ensure that the panel policy and procedures are fully accurate and address all the matters set out in National Minimum Standards 10.2 (NMS 10)
- develop the adoption support procedures to include all matters set out in National Minimum Standards 33 and 34 (NMS 34)
- ensure that good quality life story work is available to adopters and children in a timely manner to assist the adoption process (NMS 8)
- clarify the information about inter-country adoption contained in the statement of purpose (NMS 1)
- implement the plans to restructure the management and operation of the adoption agency to ensure cohesive and effective management of the agency (NMS 20)
- ensure that confidential third party information is not retained on children’s adoption files (NMS 25)
- ensure that all case decisions are clearly recorded in children’s files (NMS 25).