

Cumbria County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Setting address	Cumbria County Council, Social Services Department, 3 Alfred Street North, CARLISLE, CA1 1PX
Telephone number	01228 221801
Email	
Registered person	Cumbria County Council
Registered manager	Ms Jill Greaves
Responsible individual	
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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

Cumbria County 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 voluntary adoption agency for those wishing to adopt from overseas.

The agency provides support for adoptive 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 and provides support to birth families.

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 adoption service. The purpose of the inspection was to assess its 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. Staying safe, making a positive contribution and organisation were rated as good while achieving and enjoying was judged as outstanding.

Cumbria County Council adoption service is child focussed and puts the needs of children who require adoptive families at the centre of all its adoption work. It provides thorough and careful assessment of prospective adopters although the assessment of household safety used at the time of the inspection is not robust enough. The agency provides adopters with very good preparation and training adopting both before and after approval and the placement of children.

Matching is very careful and well considered. Very good information is sought on which to base matching decisions. The adoption panels are very thorough, engage in careful deliberations about cases presented to them and make clear recommendations to the decision maker. The agency has three versions of a children's guide to adoption that are aimed at children of differing ages and needs. However, only one of these guides contains sufficient information and some of the agency's procedures do not fully support the work being undertaken.

A range of exceptionally good support services is provided to adopters and children. This support is provided creatively in cooperation with a range of other bodies and is based on clearly assessed individual needs. This support is very highly regarded by adopters and professionals alike and is an outstanding feature of this adoption service. The agency makes good efforts to engage birth parents in the care planning process and enable them to contribute to their child's future. However, Child Permanence reports do not always contain enough evidence of the opinions and views of birth families and this may limit the information about children's backgrounds available to them in later life. The agency has placed a high priority on developing children's life-story work. However, although some is very good and timely this is not yet consistently achieved across the service. Support for birth parents is good.

The service is managed very effectively and efficiently. It has developed and improved significantly since the last inspection. Strategic and operational planning and development is very effective and provides a framework of ongoing improvement.

Improvements since the last inspection

The adoption service has made significant improvements since the last inspection and has acted on 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.

Cumbria County Council adoption service has an effective approach to meeting the needs of children through adoption. It has a clear focus on providing adopters that are well matched and appropriate for the needs of the children who need families. Good arrangements are in place to identify children who may need adoptive families as soon as possible to allow for targeted recruitment and assessment. A clear recruitment strategy sets out the authority's plans to recruit prospective adopters suitable for the needs of these children. For example, the recruitment of adopters for sibling groups, older children, children from minority ethnic backgrounds and children with disabilities is a priority for the service. Information sharing is effective. For example, adoption social workers work closely with children's social work teams and managers meet regularly to ensure that children's needs are reflected in the adoption agency's actions. Effective work takes place with other agencies to ensure that very good information is available about children. This supports effective decision making about whether children should be placed for adoption and the subsequent matching

process. Comprehensive information is sought and made available to panel to assist its considerations and recommendations. Very careful consideration is given to the appropriateness of any match made between adopters and children and clear identification of the support needed takes place. For example, very careful consideration was given to the needs of the child, the whole adoptive family and other siblings when one very complex decision about a placement was made.

Despite the high quality of information used to inform matching decision making, Child Permanence Reports do not always collate and reflect this information well enough. For example, a significant proportion of those seen did not reflect the views of birth parents well enough and other were not written in a style that would be accessible to children. Although this is not of major significance for the matching process it would limit children's ability, in later life, to fully understand the decisions made about their lives. However, the authority is working to develop the quality of these documents; it provides social workers with training, mentoring and examples of good practice. The robustness of the agency's approach to matching is further strengthened by the strong medical, education and legal advice available to it. The recent commitment to life appreciation days by which families are able to understand the backgrounds of children is also a positive development which helps improve children's experience of adoption.

The agency is very careful and rigorous 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 and assessment reports are clear and evaluative in nature. Assessments provide a clear focus on the competencies required to adopt a child and an effective summary of the strengths and vulnerabilities of each application is drawn up. The agency provides very good preparation training and good training continues to be offered after approval and after placements have been made. Effective arrangements are made to work with second time adopters or foster carers who are applying to adopt children they are caring for. 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. 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. The authority has developed a new checklist to address these shortfalls.

The authority's adoption panels support the quality of the work of the agency further. They are rigorous and effective in their scrutiny of cases brought before them. Medical, educational, professional and legal advice provided to panel is excellent and administrative systems are very effective and timely. This means that panels can consider each case in the full knowledge of the circumstances surrounding it. Panel meetings are well organised and work well to support prospective adopters attending panel to ensure they are able to contribute effectively. Panels deliberate carefully on cases and demonstrate very high professional standards. They 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. Very clear recommendations

are made and panels make clear the reasons for these. Panels offer appropriate advice to the agency in line with the regulations. Panels are appropriately constituted and effectively chaired and managed. Procedures for the operation of the panels are in place although these do not cover all the areas required by the National Minimum Standards. Effective arrangements are made to allow prompt and effective decision making by the agency. Minutes of panel meetings are very clear, well structured and informative and give the decision maker clear information about panel's deliberations and the reasons for recommendations made.

The service is managed by a suitably qualified person and experienced person. Since the last inspection there have been significant improvements in the structures underpinning the way the service is operated. These demonstrate the managers' skills and competence. 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 generally thorough and ensure that staff members are suitable people to work with vulnerable children. However, the recruitment procedures of the authority do not set out and support this process as well as they should and this could, potentially, lead to steps of the procedure being missed.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The agency's strategy and arrangements for supporting adoptive placements are outstanding. This is a major strength of the service and reflects the creative and significant work that has been done to develop the adoption support team within Cumbria. The agency has very positive working relationships with the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and other services provided by the authority, the NHS Trust or independent agencies. A very strong working relationship exists with the Looked After Children Education Service (LACES). This ensures, among other things, that children have Personal Education Plans (PEP) in place by the time they are placed for adoption. These relationships allow holistic support to be offered to children and adoptive families. Commendably, the whole adoption support service is based on initial consultation with adopters about the sorts of needs they have, the types of service required and how this would be best delivered. As a result the adoption support service provided is directly relevant to the needs of the people it serves.

Assessments of the need for adoption support are well developed and kept under review. The agency offers support that reflects individual needs and is evaluated regularly. It provides a range of flexible and individually tailored support strategies that help adoptive families to settle children into placements and to maintain these placements in the long term. Support provided can range from informal support from workers to more complex work including therapeutic input if needed. The agency offers this work proactively and adopters are confident that the agency will respond to their future needs. For example, one adopter said that, after some very successful direct work with the adopter and child had concluded, the worker informed them that

further support would be necessary as the child grew up so would be offered as needed in a few years time. In the meantime the service telephones the adopter regularly to check how things are going. The authority places a high priority on working to help children develop secure attachments. The agency provides training to staff, foster carers and adopters. It arranges direct work with children and adopters where necessary from within the adoption support team or sourced from specialist therapists. The authority ensures that adopters understand the importance of promoting children's sense of identity and history; this helps provide stable and permanent homes for children. The agency provides adopters with very good training in a range of subjects to help them care for their adopted children well. Courses in telling children about being adopted, education and caring for children who have been sexually abused are provided as well as training in attachment as mentioned earlier.

The agency provides a range of support groups and activities for adoptive adults and their birth and adopted children. It produces newsletters for adopters and children of differing ages and information is provided about other support and resources available. The letterbox arrangements for maintaining contact between adopted children and their birth families are well managed and monitored to ensure they continue to be appropriate. 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 and educational advice and support provided to the agency is strong and readily available. Legal advice of excellent quality 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. It provides a range of services to support birth families. Support groups and support services are provided at neutral venues within the authority and the service has been effective in increasing the take-up of this support. Individual telephone and face to face support is also provided.

The agency encourages birth parents to be involved in the planning for their children's future. It encourages them to express their views about the plan for adoption for their children and to provide information for the children in later life. These views are not always well enough recorded in Child Permanence Reports but it is clear that the service does try and engage birth families in this process. For example, meetings between birth and adoptive parents take place where this is appropriate and helpful and the service works with parents to provide photographs and information for children's life-story books.

The agency has significantly increased the priority it places on gaining information to allow children to maintain and understand their heritage and to understand what happened to them before and during the adoption process. The authority expects that life-story books are completed before panel considers a match between children and prospective adopters. Independent reviewing officers, panel and managers monitor the readiness of these books. Each children's social work team has a life-story resource box containing information, materials and templates to help produce life-story books. The authority has provided social workers, family support workers and foster carers with training. Members of the adoption team and other experienced colleagues provide social workers with individual support and mentoring in this work. However, despite this effort, life-story books are often not completed for the matching panel and in a number of cases are not completed until well after children are placed with adopters. The quality of these books also varies with some being of a very good standard that contain very detailed, meaningful and attractive information for children while others are not so good with less detail and less attractive layout and style.

The agency has recently started undertaking life appreciation days for all children being adopted over the age of four or five. This is in its early stages and the agency is still developing the arrangements for holding these days. Nevertheless, there are clear signs that this will enhance the adoption process by ensuring that adopters and children receive as full information about their background as possible.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Cumbria County Council adoption service was very efficient in its preparation for this inspection and the information and evidence submitted was of a very high standard. This demonstrates an ability to organise and manage well and shows commitment to the inspection process.

The organisation has a comprehensive Statement of Purpose in place. This clearly and accurately sets out the service it provides. Its policies and procedures are, generally, of good quality and reflect the aims and purpose of the adoption service. The adoption specific procedures are good and provide an effective framework for the operation of the service.

The agency has three children's guides that are aimed at children with different needs. The agency has produced a very clear guide for children who may have difficulty in understanding the written word that includes all the required information in Makaton symbol form as well as in simple text. However the other two guides,

aimed at older and younger children do not contain all the information required by regulation. For example, the guide for older children does not contain information about the adoption service locally and the guide for younger children does not include information about how to complain or arrangements for accessing an advocate. Consequently not all children receive a guide that gives them all the information they may need and this reduces children's ability to raise concerns.

The agency has an effective procedure for the recruitment of adoptive parents. This sets out its eligibility criteria and how it will prioritise the sorts of adopters who can best meet these needs of the children needing families. An information pack for prospective adopters is available that provides them with good information about adoption and the agency.

The management of the service, at both operational and strategic levels, is very good. There is clear evidence of the significant developments that have taken place within the adoption service and the consequent development of the quality of its work. Effective management and planning processes enable the service to continue to develop further. The direct operational management of the service is extremely effective and highly regarded within the authority.

The agency provides its staff with high quality management and support and this is provided within its clear focus on children's needs for suitable adoptive families. Workload management is effective and the service is well planned. 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 the dissemination of good practice is well supported. The adoption team work effectively 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. 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. Information for prospective adopters makes clear that people from a wide range of backgrounds are needed to meet children's different needs. Assessments of adopters are thorough and rigorous; they undertake a careful assessment of people's individual circumstances without discrimination. Panel processes are supportive of adopters by giving them time to prepare responses to questions that panel need to ask. Adoption support is provided proactively and in a way that is clearly based on the individual needs and circumstances of the families and children involved.

Case recording is suitable to reflect the work undertaken. Records are stored securely and confidentially. Appropriate arrangements are in place to allow authorised people to have access to these with any support necessary. For example, arrangements for access to records for birth records counselling purposes are well managed. Adoption work and records are well supervised and monitored. Clear

records of all decisions taken are retained on files and files show that quality assurance monitoring takes place.

Personnel records are maintained to a satisfactory standard and other administrative records are of good quality and regularly monitored. Premises are suitable for the purposes of the adoption agency and arrangements for the secure storage of records are appropriate. The agency’s disaster recovery plan is not well developed and does not relate specifically to the adoption service. Consequently it does not show that sufficient thought has been given regarding how the key activities of the adoption service with children and adopters will be maintained in the event of a range of disruptions to the service.

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 that the authority’s children’s guides include all the matters listed in Schedule 2 of these regulations (Regulation 3(1) of the Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations 2003).	03/07/2009

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)
- ensure that Child Permanence Reports are consistently completed to a sufficiently high standard (NMS 5)
- ensure that the panel policy and procedures cover all matters set out in National Minimum Standard 10.2 (NMS 10.2)
- ensure that clear written recruitment and selection procedures for appointing staff which follow good practice in safeguarding children and young people are in place (NMS 19.2)
- ensure that good quality life-story work is available to all adopters and children in a timely manner to assist the adoption process (NMS 8)
- ensure that a disaster recovery plan for the adoption agency is in place which includes both provision of premises and the safeguarding and back-up of records (NMS 29.5).

