

Newcastle upon Tyne Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Sean White / Dennis Bradley
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Setting address	Children's Services Directorate, Cragside House, Heaton Road, NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE, NE6 1SE
Telephone number	0191 278 8500
Email	adoption@newcastle.gov.uk
Registered person	Newcastle City Council
Registered manager	Deborah Herring
Responsible individual	Karen Simmons
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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

This is a local authority agency that undertakes, or makes arrangements for all statutory adoption work. The service recruits, prepares and assess prospective adopters. It provides, or makes arrangements through independent agencies, for support services for anyone affected by adoption. This would include adopted adults, adopted children, birth parents/families and adoptive families. The service operates and is managed within the wider children's social care provision and is located in premises accessible to people with a genuine interest in, or who have business with the agency.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The agency has a strong approach to recruiting and assessing only the most suitable adopters. The strategy being to approve families that are able to meet the wide range of complex needs and histories of children requiring placements. This is achieved through good prospective adopter reports and a rigorous approach to scrutiny, although panel attendance is inconsistent. Careful matching of children with families ensures the best possible placements are achieved.

The approach to supporting placements and those affected by adoption is well managed. A wide range of complex and sophisticated strategies are used to assist people to overcome challenges and uncertainties. The agency has access to a range of specialist advisors, but there is insufficient input in respect of medical advice.

Birth parents are encouraged to be as involved as possible in the planning for their children's future and in preparing life story work. There are good support facilities available for birth families.

This is a well managed agency that has a clear underpinning strategy, up-to-date procedures and protocols and a strong approach to equality and diversity. It is efficiently organised through strong leadership and the commitment and efforts of skilled, experienced workers.

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency took seriously the issues raised following the last inspection and undertook an action plan that resolved the major shortfalls. In particular, a re-alignment of services to children at operational level has had a major impact on planning for children, working partnerships across different teams and overall operational efficiency. This has led to better, more efficient arrangements in planning

for children, matching and placement. It is a considerable achievement given the strides the authority had to make.

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.

The agency has a strong approach to ensuring that children's futures are safeguarded through effective and realistic matching with families best able to meet their needs. The recruitment strategy is clearly aimed at identifying people that are able to provide homes for those children the agency has placed for adoption. These are children with a wide range of complex needs, circumstances and backgrounds and there has been considerable success in recent times with no disruptions. Families are provided with all available information about the children being considered for placement with them, which enables decisions to be made from a fully informed standpoint.

The approach to preparing and assessing prospective adopters is thorough and social workers bring due rigour and sensitivity to the process. Preparation groups are well managed and informative and there is a focused approach to ensuring applicants are fully appraised of the adoption process and the responsibilities of providing lifelong parenting. One issue of inappropriate name changing is, however, disappointing. The assessment process, including all required checks being pursued, is detailed, quality managed to a high standard and results in only the most appropriate applicants being considered. The health and safety checking of dwellings, however, is not fully detailed.

The adoption panel continues the thoroughness of approach; it is well managed, suitably constituted and gives effective scrutiny to the business placed before it. Up-to-date policies and procedures govern its operation and functions. Decisions made on the panel's recommendations are equally robust and aimed at ensuring that children's futures are secured through effective and realistic matching with only the most appropriate families. The panel minutes, whilst giving clear accounts of deliberations, do not give explicit reasons why recommendations have been made and do not routinely provide advice to the agency. Although the panel has, hitherto, always been a quorum when it meets, some members have a poor attendance record, which has the potential for insufficient members to form a quorum. This could cause delays.

The service is managed and operated by suitably qualified, very experienced and skilled workers. They bring a determined and conscientious approach to the work of the agency and demonstrate high levels of knowledge and understanding of adoption

matters, including good practice, current thinking and the legislative framework. Staff recruitment procedures are strong, the only shortfall being some inconsistency in how previous work histories are recorded.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency provides strong, continuing support for all adopters throughout the process, informing families of the support networks and facilities available to them is a central theme, from preparation groups onwards. Support workers are involved in the process from the beginning, providing an integrated and holistic approach.

The service demonstrates a clear understanding of the needs of adoptive families and those affected by adoption and provides, or makes arrangements for, a range of opportunities and facilities that can be accessed or made available. Where there are complex needs or circumstances, including issues of ethnicity and difference, the service works well with other agencies and services to provide sophisticated packages of support that are tailored to meet individual situations. This enables families to work with the agency through challenges and difficulties within clear, well defined structures.

Whilst the agency has access to a range of specialist advisors, including legal and medical, this is not the strongest aspect of the service. The arrangements for medical advice are not as comprehensive as would be expected for an agency of this size. It is evident that there is insufficient time allocated to the medical advisor to be involved in the full range of agency responsibilities. The medical advice provided is of an acceptable standard, but availability, including attendance at the adoption panel, is limited.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency has developed a strong and focused approach to working with birth parents, which enables children to have the potential for a greater understanding of their backgrounds and family histories. Their views are sought, recorded and taken seriously and acted upon if appropriate.

There is a commitment to ensuring children are prepared for their adoption and have life story work undertaken. Workers across the authority liaise to this effect and produce life story books under a careful monitoring system. Adoption support workers enhance this by undertaking historical work where adopted children have limited information about their backgrounds. There are however, some shortfalls in respect of the timescales achieved by social workers producing good quality life story

books and later life letters.

Birth parents have the luxury of a dedicated worker who can be allocated to them should they wish or require support, either in managing their child's adoption, or coping with issues thereafter. This enables birth parents to have continuity in their support systems and confidence in the service.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The organisation and management of the service is undertaken with commitment, energy and a conscientious approach to providing children with the best possible opportunities through adoption.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. There is a clear understanding of current thinking and legislation regarding difference. This is reflected in all areas of operations and practice, particularly in respect of appropriate placements of children that reflect their backgrounds, which encourages and underpins their sense of identity.

The agency operates within the framework of a well presented statement of purpose, which reflects the recently reviewed policies and procedures that guide and inform practice. A children's guide informs children of how adoption works and their rights.

The service is managed well by skilled and experienced personnel, all of whom demonstrate a focused approach to the wellbeing of children. There are well defined operational practices that are guided and supported in an efficient way, including the allocation and management of workloads, prioritisation of tasks and responsibilities and strategic planning. This has resulted in a workforce that is able to operate in a committed and professional way and feels valued and well supported at all levels of the service. The agency is fully staffed and although very busy, is able to undertake all of its duties and responsibilities. The executive is fully informed of the agency's work and has an understanding of adoption and its importance in planning for permanence.

The resources and arrangements for the administration of the service are well managed and coordinated. Duties and responsibilities being carried out by experienced and committed workers who feel integrated into the adoption service as equals. Case recording is well organised and suitably quality monitored; case records being of a good standard, easy to negotiate and which contained all required information. There are appropriate procedures and practices in place in respect of

access to, and the sharing of confidential information.

Records in respect of staff are, in the main, well managed. They do not include in all cases, however, all required details, particularly in respect of checking previous employment. Panel members' files had minor omissions.

The service operates from premises close to the city that are comfortable, accessible and secure.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- allow adopters to change a child's name before an order is made only in exceptional circumstances (NMS 4.6)
- amend the health and safety checklist to include more details (NMS 4.6)
- include in panel minutes the reasons for the recommendations being made and any advice to the agency (NMS 12.6)
- arrange for all panel members to attend regularly (NMS 12)
- arrange for more availability of the medical advisor (NMS 18)
- include all required information in staff and panel members' files (NMS 28)