

Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council 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

Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council has a dedicated adoption team, which includes a post adoption social worker, who focuses on adoption support. The 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 Council has commissioned a similar service for inter-country adopters from a local voluntary adoption agency.

In addition, the service carries out the matching, introduction, placement of children with domestic adopters and the support of adoption placements. The service also operates and maintains a letter box system, which supports the exchange of information in adoption placements.

An independent counselling and support service is provided to birth parents through commissioning arrangements with a voluntary adoption agency. This agency, in conjunction with Calderdale adoption service, provides post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, which includes birth records counselling and intermediary work.

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 agency. The purpose of the inspection was to assess the service's compliance with the adoption national minimum standards (NMS). All the standards were inspected under the four outcome areas of staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and organisation, which were judged as good.

Its recruitment strategy promotes equality and diversity and is clearly based on an awareness of the children requiring adoption. The recruitment of adopters is effective and thorough assessments are undertaken, which ensures people are suitable and competent to adopt children. However, the safety checklist used to assess the safety of adopters' home is not comprehensive. Contractual arrangements are in place for the assessment and support of inter-country adopters.

The service is extremely child focused and children are matched with adopters who are suitable to meet their needs. The matching processes and documentation are of a good standard. The service has a very low disruption rate. Adoption support services are based on a person's assessed needs and services are designed to meet them. Good, effective support is provided to people affected by adoption.

All matters brought before the adoption panel are rigorously scrutinised ensuring the best outcomes are achieved for children and young people, who are to be placed in adoptive families. However, the service's adoption panel and procedures do not contain all the information required under the adoption NMS and Regulations.

Considerable efforts are made to engage birth parents in the care planning process and they are encouraged to provide information about their child's backgrounds and to contribute to their child's heritage. Good contractual arrangements are in place for independent support to birth families.

There is a commitment to ensuring children have a full personal history and their heritage is maintained. However, the Child Permanence Reports (CPRS) and life story work are not always completed to a qualitative standard. Life story books are also not always completed in a timely manner.

Adopters are encouraged and supported wherever possible, to meet with birth parents. It also seeks to plan, support and facilitate direct and indirect contact between birth families and children, providing it is in the child's best interests to do so. There is a letterbox system and assistance with letterbox contact is available. A counselling and intermediary service is provided to adopted adults and birth relatives. Respect and equality is provided to all those involved in the adoption process.

Managers and staff of the adoption team have considerable knowledge, experience and skills and work co-operatively with children's social workers to achieve positive outcomes. Quality assurance systems though are not sufficiently robust, particularly in relation to agency and personnel records. Insufficient staff within the service also impairs their effectiveness. In addition, the children's guide also does not contain all the information required. These matters need to be addressed and have been brought to the attention of the service by the recommendations made in this report.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last full inspection was carried out in November 2006 and resulted in three actions and one recommendation being made. These related to staying safe and organisation, which are two of the key outcome areas. The service has addressed one of the three actions, the recommendation and partially addressed another action. However, one action and part of another action remain outstanding and these have been identified again in this inspection.

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 adoption service has an effective recruitment strategy and successfully recruits adopters for children requiring adoptive families. However, as Calderdale is a small local authority geographically, the majority of children are placed outside the area. Effective and positive working relationships exist between the adoption service, their neighbouring authorities and the Yorkshire and Humberside consortium of adoption agencies. The acting adoption manager is involved in this consortium and the team has access to information about children and families. The service also uses the National Adoption Register (NAR) and takes part in adoption exchange days to facilitate an effective match of a child with adopters.

There is a clear understanding of the importance in placing children with families, who best meet their assessed needs. Strenuous efforts are therefore made to secure the best possible match. This is very evident in the consideration given to placing children with complex histories, or heritage. Adoption placements are generally made in a timely manner, however, in the few instances where there has been delay; there are clear reasons for this, which are well documented. The service has been successful in placing children with dual heritage, disabilities and large sibling groups. Children's views are taken into account wherever possible when family finding.

Introductions and placements are well managed and mid point reviews take place. Adopters are fully involved in the matching process and their views are included in adoption placement reports. The medical adviser and other professionals involved with the children, talk with adopters or attend meetings to provide full information. The service has established a system to obtain further information about a child and their life before adoption, with the introduction of life appreciation days. This has enabled adopters to obtain more detailed information regarding the child with whom they have been matched. The agency has only had one disruption in the past three years, which demonstrates a successful approach to careful and considered matching.

The authority has worked hard to improve the quality of the CPR, with staff provided CPR training. However, while some improvements in the CPR have been effected, these assessments are still of variable quality, for example, some are written in an inappropriate style and contain limited information regarding the birth parents.

There are clear processes and procedures to handle adoption enquiries and applications from domestic adopters, which are compatible with the agency's equal opportunities and anti-discriminatory practice. Adopters confirmed that they had received 'useful' information regarding the adoption process. Calderdale has a contract with a voluntary adoption agency to provide an inter-country adoption service.

There is a formal preparation, assessment and approval process of domestic adopters. Preparation training is provided at a frequency that is suitable for the

service's needs. The training materials used are appropriate and include contributions from adopters. Adopters generally spoke positively about the preparation training, which they stated was 'well presented', 'informative', 'very enlightening' and an 'excellent course'. A number of adopters commented positively about the 'inclusive atmosphere' created. They also spoke about the 'interactive nature' of the training groups, which had increased their participation in group exercises and discussions; some stated that they were 'disappointed' when the preparation training ended. However, a small percentage of adopters said that the preparation training could have been more concise and taken place over a shorter period of time.

Adopters' assessments are of a good quality; in so far as they are thorough, analytical and cover issues, such as loss, life experiences, parenting capacity and support networks well. The views of applicants' children are also fully ascertained and well recorded. All necessary enquiries and statutory checks are carried out, including where applicable, educational and employer references. Checks with applicants' former partners are also undertaken. The service ensures adopters are able to look after children in a safe manner through the use of a health and safety checklist. This checklist though, is not comprehensive, for example, it does not address window blind chords or poisonous plants. The service has introduced an effective system to monitor the timescales of adopters' assessments. Adopters' assessments are usually carried out in the prescribed timescales.

Adopters commented positively about the assessment process. Staff were said to carry out their work in a 'professional', 'knowledgeable', 'skilled' and 'sensitive' manner. All adopters have the assessment document prior to panel to check for accuracy and to make comments. Adopters stated that their report was 'a realistic picture' of them and given them in the required legislative timescale.

Adopters are provided with written information regarding the matching, introductory and placement processes. Information is also provided regarding the NAR and the Independent Review Mechanism. This information is reinforced to adopters throughout the adoption process.

Adopters prepare a book or DVD about themselves for use in preparing children or provide photographs for younger children. There is a written system in place for notifying the authority in the event of a serious illness or the death of an adopted child.

The adoption panel has a clearly written set of policies and procedures, which govern its function and operation. However, these documents do not fully meet the adoption NMS and Regulations, for example, the procedure for addressing situations where panel members can not reach a majority view.

Adopters are invited to attend the adoption panel, with good preparatory work undertaken with them, prior to their attendance. 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 effectively chaired. Panel members are well prepared, make appropriate observations and ask relevant

questions. Panel minutes are informative; clearly reflect the panel's discussion, with detailed reasons given for the panel's conclusions and recommendations, which are clearly recorded.

Adopters stated that both the chairperson and panel members 'warmly welcomed' them and made 'real efforts to put them at ease'. The majority of adopters stated that the questions asked were 'appropriate'.

The Agency Decision Maker (ADM) ensures all information relating to a case, including the panel minutes are thoroughly scrutinised before making a decision. Notifications of the decision are sent out within the necessary timescales.

The acting manager and staff are suitably qualified and have experience, knowledge and skills in adoption work. Social workers in the childcare teams have variable experience in adoption work; however, they have access to more experienced colleagues, adoption social workers and the guidance documents prepared by the adoption team. Staff are positive in their comments about the acting adoption team manager and workers, clearly valuing their expertise and the support provided.

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. 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 fully recognises the importance of providing sensitive and qualitative support to adopters in maintaining stable and permanent homes for children. Considerable efforts are made to ensure that adopters retain their social worker following their approval. This arrangement continues throughout the matching, introductions and placement of children, until at least the adoption order is made.

A variety of support services are available to adopters both before and after the adoption order. They are individually tailored to meet the family's assessed needs and provided in a creative, flexible way. This support can range from informal support from the worker to more complex work, including therapeutic input, if needed.

Support services available, includes support from staff during the introduction and placement of a child with their adoptive family. Financial support, a monthly support group for adopters and an annual adoption celebration day for adoptive families. A newsletter is produced twice a year and adopters are also able to access a variety of internal and external training.

The adoption service's works in partnership with the disabled children's team, the looked after children education team (LACE) and the looked after and adopted

children's health team (LAACH). These close working relationships ensure adopters have access to a variety of specialist services to meet their specific needs, for example, the involvement of the LACE service enables adopted children's educational needs to be addressed. It also allows a complex package of multi-agency support services to be provided, with a view to meeting the holistic needs of the family.

Adopters are made aware of the support services available, at an early stage in their contact with the agency. Adoption placement and support plans are well written and generally of a good standard. Requests for support are responded to promptly and services provided in a sensitive, thoughtful manner.

The service has access to a variety of specialist advisers and written protocols are in place regarding their roles. Specialist advisers are used to support adopters, for example, they have the opportunity to see the medical adviser. The range of specialist services available ensures adopters receive appropriate support, at all stages of the adoption process.

People affected by adoption receive a service that is appropriate and tailored to their particular need. They are treated fairly, openly, respectfully and sensitively. Written policies are carried out in practice by experienced workers, who respond promptly to adoption enquiries or service requests.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

There is a clear, strategy in place in relation to work with birth parents and their families. Every effort is made to work with birth parents to plan for their children's futures and although cooperation is often difficult to maintain; it is clear that appropriate efforts are made. The views of birth parents are sought and recorded in Child Permanence Reports.

The adoption service also has a contract with an adoption support 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. Real efforts are made to ensure support is provided to birth parents and their families at an early stage, for example, when an adoption plan is being considered for their child. Birth parents and their families are able to access this service at any time. Clear arrangements are in place to monitor the service's effectiveness and ensure it provides positive outcomes and value for money.

The service also undertakes support to birth parents and their relatives. This work is carried out in a thoughtful, sensitive manner. Birth parents have indicated that their contact with the service has been a positive, experience and resulted in good outcomes for them.

There is a strong commitment to ensuring children have a full personal history and their heritage is maintained. However, life story work is not always carried out to a

consistent standard; for whilst there are some good examples of such work being completed in a timely way; there are other examples, where there has been some delay in gathering information and the completion of the life story book.

Contact arrangements are well recorded. Direct contact is usually managed by the adopters; however, the service will provide adopters support, where the arrangements are difficult or complex. Arrangements for indirect contact are managed through the letter box system. This is a robust, well managed system. It is evident that adopters are prepared for one off meetings with birth parents and understand the value of maintaining letterbox contact. Assistance is provided to adopters and birth families in writing the letters.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Promoting equality and non-discriminatory practice is reflected in the service's policies and practice. Children are carefully matched with families that reflect their heritage. All people who are interested in becoming adoptive parents are welcomed with out prejudice, treated openly, fairly and respectfully. Work with birth parents is also carried out in a way that demonstrates respect and endeavours to engage them in the planning for their children.

The adoption service has an up-to-date statement of purpose (SOP), which quite clearly details its aims, objectives and the services provided. This document is supported by a range of policies and procedures, which inform and underpin the operations and strategic direction of the agency.

The service has its own children's guide, which can be produced in a variety of formats to meet children's differing needs. However, it is rather limited in presentation and does not contain all the information required, for example, it does not contain the name, address and telephone number of the Children's Rights Director.

Adopters are provided with well written, comprehensive information regarding the adoption process, which is sent out in a timely way. This literature is attractively presented, does not discriminate and clearly reflects the service's practice. 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 and this is effectively communicated to adopters.

The management of the adoption service is undertaken by people who are appropriately qualified and have the necessary background and knowledge in adoption. They demonstrate a clear understanding of their roles, responsibilities and are extremely committed to the service. Staff speak highly of them and indicate that the adoption service is effectively led and well managed.

There are clear written procedures and systems for monitoring the adoption service's performance. However these quality assurance systems are not robust, for example, case records are not always accurate.

The service is staffed with a group of workers who are able to demonstrate skill, knowledge and experience of working with children and adoption. They receive regular, good quality supervision and are well supported by the acting manager. Staff are clear about the structure of the service, its lines of accountability and communication. They also have a good understanding of their roles, responsibilities, as well as who deputises, in the absence of the acting manager.

Arrangements for managing cases and workload are efficient within the resources available. The service's main business is undertaken with a clear understanding of outcomes and timescales. However, insufficient professional staff, at times impairs its effectiveness, for example, family finding for children with complex needs.

The service places a priority on training and encourages staff to take up any training and development opportunities available. Staff are positive about the training provided, which they state are of a good standard.

There are appropriate policies and procedures in place for case recording. Case records are well organised, maintained and ordered in line with the file index. The quality of records is generally good, as they are legible and contained full, up-to-date information. Decisions by supervisors are recorded on case files.

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, complaints and any allegations that are made. These records are well maintained and securely stored.

Personnel and Panel Members files are well ordered and securely stored. The recruitment and selection process though is not sufficiently robust, as not all personnel files contained the information required, for example, if staff have worked with children or vulnerable adults in the past, verification as to the reason why their previous employment ended. However, all Panel members' files contain all the required information.

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

Staff and carers are safely recruited which reduces the risk of children being exposed

to potential abusers. Criminal Records Bureau checks and references are in place prior to staff starting work and references are verified. Although the service does not as standard seek the reasons for previous employment episodes ending if staff have worked with children or vulnerable adults in the past. This limits an otherwise rigorous process.

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):

- improve the health and safety checklist for prospective adopters (NMS 4)
- ensure the adoption panel policies and procedures meet the NMS and adoption legislation (NMS10)
- improve the quality of child permanence reports (NMS 5)
- ensure life work, including the life book is undertaken to a consistent standard and provided, in a timely way (NMS 8)
- ensure the service's children's guide contains all the information required (breach of regulation 3(1) of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003)
- ensure robust quality assurance systems are implemented and maintained for all aspects of the adoption service (NMS17)
- ensure there are a sufficient number of staff working for the purposes of the adoption service (breach of regulation 10 (a)(b) of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003).
- ensure verification is sought from staff's previous employers whose duties involve working with children or vulnerable adults as to the reason why the employment ended (breach of regulation 6(2)(c) and 11(3)(d).