

Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Sean White / Sue Winson
Type of inspection	Key

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Registered manager	David Fisher
Responsible individual	Steve Garner
Date of last inspection	09/07/2007

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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 adoption agency that undertakes, or makes provision for, all statutory adoption responsibilities; it is managed within the Children in Care Service of the authority. The agency recruits, prepares and assesses prospective adopters, matches and places children with families and provides support services to anyone affected by adoption. Birth parents are provided with opportunities to access the services of an independent agency for support and counselling.

It is located close to the town centre of Rochdale.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was a full, announced inspection of the agency, undertaken over four days by two inspectors.

This is an agency that places the needs of children, their safety and welfare at the forefront of all its activities.

There is a focused approach to the recruitment and assessment of adoptive families, with the needs of children determining adopters' suitability. Assessments are thorough and all involved, including the adoption panel, bring rigour and commitment to all activity and practice. Great care is taken when matching children with the most suitable families, especially in recognising the importance of backgrounds and heritage in considering the best placements. Managers and workers demonstrate considerable skill and knowledge in adoption work, which ensures the success of their endeavours.

There is a conscientious and motivated approach to supporting people affected by adoption. Families and children are enabled and assisted to make placements successful and adopted adults can access birth records counselling (although there are some delays in this service). Birth parents are provided with support both from the service, or through an arrangement with an independent agency.

The agency is well managed at all levels; the service operates efficiently and effectively in all areas of its responsibilities. There are, nevertheless, some difficulties at times in respect of limited staff resources. It is an inclusive service that takes seriously the issues of difference and equality.

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency has taken seriously the recommendations made at the previous inspection and addressed all issues satisfactorily. Assessments are more efficiently managed and are now very consistent, and records and procedures contain all required information. Adoption support is suitably managed and life-story work has improved considerably in both content and timeliness.

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 clear commitment to ensuring that children are matched and placed with the most suitable adopters that can meet their needs. Working within the local consortium of adoption agencies, there is a clear strategy for recruiting people who can provide adoptive homes for children with a wide range of complex and challenging needs. There is a strong motivation to acknowledging the heritage and backgrounds of children, and the importance this plays in considering the best match possible. Although the agency has struggled in recent times to recruit as many adopters as it would like, improvements are evident and numbers have increased on last years figures.

Adopters are provided with all necessary and available information when a match is being considered and workers are diligent in ensuring that there is a clear understanding of all the circumstances of children's lives. The quality of the content of some Child Permanence Reports, however, is inconsistent; this makes for a less clear understanding of all relevant material. This has not had any negative impact on placements; there have been no disruptions in recent times.

The agency's approach to the preparation and assessment of prospective adopters demonstrates rigour, clarity and sensitivity. People from a wide range of backgrounds have been recruited, providing the service with adopters able to be matched with children with specific or complex needs. Practices in the service are thorough and detailed and the adoption panel are provided with well-written reports that are informed and analytical, and which outline the parenting capacity of the applicants.

The panel, which is managed well, is suitably constituted and always sits as a quorum, brings further rigour and quality control to the business brought before it. Attending applicants are treated with respect and sensitivity, and are involved in the proceedings. There is a clear understanding of, and commitment to, meeting the needs of children through adoption with all members of the panel contributing

relevant and thoughtful input to the task in hand. The panel is efficiently administered, minutes of meetings are clear and well written, enabling the decision maker to be fully informed of the proceedings and the reasons recommendations are being made. Decisions are made conscientiously and in a timely way.

The authority has clear and robust recruitment and selection procedures, and effective measures are in place to ensure workers are continually suitable to work with children. The manager and staff are all qualified to required standards and are very experienced and knowledgeable in adoption and children's social care. They demonstrate a deep understanding of adoption work, bring a clear and well-developed professionalism to their duties and have a conscientious motivation to the well-being of children. The service has a solid working relationship with colleagues across children's services and are valued and respected for their skills and knowledge.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service has a strong commitment to working with and supporting families to enable placements to be successful. Careful consideration is given to the needs of children and their adoptive families prior to placement and support plans are detailed in ways that reflect their unique circumstances.

Workers undertake their support duties with considerable motivation. Families demonstrate a clear appreciation and gratitude for the efforts made to ease their adoption journey into a manageable and positive experience.

The agency identifies support needs through thorough assessments, undertakes to access any necessary specialist support that circumstances demand and works closely with external agencies.

The agency provides a range of support services to adults affected by adoption, including birth records counselling. There have been delays, however, in responding in a timely way, creating a waiting list of some weeks in many cases.

A long-standing medical advisor has recently left the agency and there have been some challenges associated with sourcing the necessary level of input required. Plans have recently been agreed, however, to ease these pressures.

Legal advice is readily available to the agency, it is of a good standard and ensures the service is supported through all proceedings.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

All birth parents and other birth family members are encouraged to become involved in the planning for their children's adoption. Every effort is made to elicit their contribution to the process and enable them to express their views and wishes. This is not, however, always clearly recorded on Child Permanence Reports. Nevertheless it is clear that birth parents are viewed as important in the adoption process, are treated with dignity and respect and their contributions valued. All birth parents are provided with information about where they can source independent support, but it is also clear that the agency has strong relationships with many and provides advice and support from within the service.

The indirect contact system (letterbox) is a positive aspect of the agency's approach to maintaining children's heritage. People are assisted in letter writing and there are considerable efforts made to sustain correspondence between adoptive families, children and their birth parents.

Children's heritage and background is recognised as very important to adopted children and the agency is motivated to the production of good quality life-story books. Some are better than others and there is inconsistency in the timeliness of their production. There have been clear improvements made in recent times, however, with only a minority of children being placed without a life-story book. The aim is for all children being presented to the adoption panel to have a prepared book in readiness for matching and placement. Life-story work is also a positive feature of the agency, with a clear commitment to working with children in preparation for their adoptive futures.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

There is an up-to-date Statement of Purpose in place that is underpinned and informed by a range of policies and procedures that guide the work of the service. The children's guides, whilst suitable generally, are being improved.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The agency has an entirely non-judgemental approach to its practice. The recognition of difference, and its positive impact on working with children and families from a wide range of backgrounds and circumstances, is woven throughout the agency's work and practice. There is a

clearly defined philosophy of matching and placing children with families that offer the most suitable placement and reflect the child's background, culture and origins.

The management of the service, at all levels, is good. Workers are encouraged and supported to carry out their duties to the best of their abilities. Regular supervision ensures that cases are carefully managed and that timescales are adhered to wherever possible. The staff group is enabled to work with its own initiative within a carefully structured framework that provides sound underpinning to the agency's duties and responsibilities. Allocation and caseload management is efficient and monitored closely. The manager prepares reports for the executive regularly and senior managers are fully informed of the service and its operations.

The development of skills and knowledge is a positive aspect of the agency. Workers are encouraged to attend a wide range of training and development opportunities, which adds further value to the agency's knowledge and skill base. Workers feel supported and valued by the agency.

Although the manager and staff work efficiently and undertake their responsibilities seriously, and with great commitment, there are some aspects of the agency's duties that are becoming increasingly difficult to manage in a timely way. Staffing levels are the main reason for this which are insufficient to meet all responsibilities. Nevertheless, workloads are managed in a way that ensures that children's needs are paramount and are always successfully prioritised.

The administration of the service is undertaken efficiently and carefully, although resources are somewhat stretched; there is no dedicated administrator for the agency. Case records are maintained to a good standard. They are suitably indexed, it is easy to locate information and are kept up to date; random auditing ensures consistency. Records are maintained securely and are protected from fire and water damage.

Personnel (electronic) and panel members' (paper) records contain all necessary information and are kept to the required standard.

The premises are located close to the town centre and are accessible to anyone having business with the agency. However, people with mobility difficulties, workers and visitors, only have access to the ground floor. The office provides adequate space and facilities, with the inclusion of a discrete prayer room.

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):

- continue to improve the quality and presentation of Child Permanence Reports (NMS 5)
- respond more promptly to people affected by adoption who request a service (NMS 33.3)
- employ sufficient staff to meet the needs and responsibilities of the service. (NMS 21)