

Sefton MBC 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

Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council's 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 and placement of children with adopters; the support of adoption placements; post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, including birth records counselling and intermediary work. 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.

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 outcome areas of staying safe, enjoying and achieving and making a positive contribution. The adoption service's organisation and its promotion of equality and diversity were also inspected.

The service is good at recruiting prospective adopters. It undertakes a thorough assessment process that ensures that people are suitable, competent and well prepared to adopt children. Children are matched with adopters who are suitable to meet their needs. Planning arrangements within the authority are good. This means that contingency plans for adoption are developed early which helps reduce delays for children. Good information is provided about children when adoption plans are being considered although child permanence reports are not consistently well written. The authority has experienced difficulties in the preparation of life story work for children in a timely manner. It has addressed this and now has systems to ensure that this work is undertaken promptly. However, the benefits of this are not being fully experienced yet. The authority provides good support to people affected by adoption. Support for children and their adoptive families is provided based on their individual needs and the authority works hard to support the birth parents of children being adopted.

The adoption service is very well managed, both strategically and operationally. Significant restructuring and development of the adoption service and wider

children's services has taken place in the last few years. This has produced an effective operational focus on providing good outcomes for children through adoption and clear plans for further improvement.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection the service was asked to carry out a number of actions to improve the quality of the adoption service it provides. It was asked to retain full information about all staff working for the service to ensure they are suitable, qualified and experienced to work with children. It was also asked to ensure that prospective adopters' assessments were of a consistently high quality and that all administrative matters relating to panel and the agency's decision making were effective. The adoption service was asked to ensure that all recording was of consistently high quality and that robust quality assurance systems were implemented and maintained for all aspects of the adoption service. These matters have been fully addressed.

The service was also asked to improve the quality of child permanence reports and ensure that life story work and the production of life story books was carried out in a consistent and timely manner. The adoption service has taken action to deal with these matters but they remain not fully addressed.

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 service has an effective and successful adoptive parent recruitment strategy. It has systems in place to identify the sorts of people required to meet the needs of children who may require adoptive families. The assessment and approval of prospective adopters is carried out on a priority basis based on the needs of children with adoption as a plan.

The preparation, training and assessment of prospective adopters is undertaken with care, thoroughness and attention to detail. After an application is accepted the assessment process is timely and efficiently managed. Thorough checks on the suitability and competence of prospective adopters take place. Reports are well written, evaluative and reflect the process that adopters have undertaken. This provides the adoption panel with the necessary information on which to make its recommendations on the suitability of applicants. Preparation training includes input from adoptive parents, birth parents and foster carers and is highly regarded by adopters. As a consequence, prospective adopters for the authority are well prepared to adopt children.

The authority has recently developed a permanence planning meeting process. This seeks to identify, early on, those children for whom there may be a contingency plan for adoption. This enables plans to be developed early, potential matches to be considered and also serves to inform the adopter recruitment strategy of the needs of children who may need adoptive families in the future. This process is relatively new but is already demonstrating success in helping find children well matched families without undue delay. Effective working relationships have been developed with hospitals under an agreed protocol for adoption medicals to ensure that these are undertaken in a timely manner.

Adoption and field social work staff liaise effectively to arrange matches between children and adopters and there is a good record of successful adoptions. There is a clear, structured and well recorded process in place to make these matching decisions. This demonstrates a thorough and rigorous practice for any child looking at their records in later life.

The authority will not make decisions about whether a child should be placed for adoption or matched with prospective adopters without full information. Panel is robust in ensuring that full information is available to inform its deliberations. It will not consider cases without good information. However, the quality of information about children included in child permanence reports is variable. Some are of good quality while others are weaker. For example, the recorded views of a birth parent were exactly the same in two documents for children placed some time apart. This did not ensure the birth parent's views were recorded well enough for each child. In other cases key events are not clearly and unambiguously recorded. In a number of reports the information appears to be copied from other documents such as court reports. Consequently, the information contained is not always written in an appropriately accessible manner for consideration by children in later life. The authority has restructured its children's social work teams and improved its arrangements for managing the adoption work carried out in these teams. This work is well considered but the benefits are not yet being fully felt.

The authority works effectively with the local adoption consortium to find adoptive parents for children for whom there are no appropriate adopters locally. It refers to the adoption register as necessary.

The adoption panel is correctly constituted and appropriately managed. It undertakes its responsibilities with commitment and rigour. It is thorough in its consideration of reports submitted and conscientious about the recommendations it makes. Panel cites very clear reasons for the recommendations made and provides an effective quality assurance function by providing the agency with feedback about the quality of work presented to it. Recruitment of panel members is thorough and careful to ensure that only suitable people are allowed to act as panel members. The administration of the panel enables business to be conducted in a timely way. This means that delay for children is minimised. Decision making is prompt and shows a thoroughness which ensures children have the most suitable placements in adoptive families.

The authority's recruitment procedures are robust and ensure that all staff members working for the purposes of the adoption service are suitable people with the appropriate qualifications to carry out their roles. The managers and staff of the agency are all suitably experienced and provide clear strategic and operational leadership. Adoption staff know and understand adoption and social work with children. They understand the legislative framework, the impact it has on children's lives and clearly focus on promoting the well-being of children.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The authority's arrangements for supporting adoptive placements are effective. It provides children and adopters with good support throughout the introduction process and ensures that placements are well reviewed and supported. Adoption placement plans and children's adoption support plans are well written and comprehensive. The service ensures that arrangements to delegate parental responsibility to prospective adopters are also clearly agreed and recorded.

The service provides a range of flexible and individually tailored support strategies to help adopted children to settle into their new families and cope with difficulties they may experience. Support provided can range from informal support from placement support workers to more complex work input from the authority's families and schools together (FAST) team which is highly regarded by adopters. Support work is creative, flexible and based on the needs of individuals. For example, work to promote the early development of children is carried out through the portage scheme and practical help is provided for children with families to help adoptive parents meet the needs of other children in the family. Placement support workers undertake life work with children in adoptive placements and will repeat this work, if necessary, as children grow older or where it is needed to help them understand their past. A new adoption support social worker post has been created to further strengthen the work of the placement support team.

The agency provides a range of support groups and activities for adoptive parents and their adopted children. It provides information about other support and resources available. Training is provided for adoptive parents and one-to-one input and advice is available as needed. For example, recent staff and panel members' training in life work from a noted national expert in the field was extended to adopters and prospective adopters who found this very helpful.

The letterbox arrangements for maintaining contact between adopted children and their birth families are managed effectively. Post adoption support, including birth records counselling, is based on effective arrangements and procedures that ensure support is available when requested. This work is undertaken jointly with a voluntary agency and this arrangement is monitored to ensure it is able to meet the needs of people asking for support.

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

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The adoption service makes significant efforts to support all people who have been affected by adoption, including birth families. Support to birth families is provided by the workers from the adoption service itself in their everyday work. More formal support arrangements are provided through an independent service. Birth parents are referred promptly for support for themselves. They are also encouraged and assisted to provide information about themselves and their families to help adopted children understand their backgrounds. Birth parents are helped, where necessary, to write letters for the letter box and encouraged to maintain contact in line with the contact agreement. The authority has recently developed its contract with the independent service so it will proactively engage with birth parents as soon as there is a contingency plan for the adoption of their child. This will allow improved support but also help gain fuller information for child permanence reports and children's life story work.

The agency regards life story work for children being adopted as important. It has placed significant emphasis on providing training for staff, panel members, foster carers and prospective adopters in life work. This has been delivered by an acknowledged expert in the field. A significant staff shortage in the placement support team several months ago has led to a backlog of life story work which has been severely delayed. This has now been addressed and the authority has dedicated additional resources to this work to reduce the backlog and ensure that work is carried out in a timely manner in future. The effectiveness of this work is demonstrated by the fact that the number of delayed cases has halved and work is now being done in a more timely and focussed manner. When completed, life story books are of good quality and well prepared and presented. The authority has commissioned work to be done by an independent agency in situations where work was needed with greater urgency. Nevertheless, a number of children do not have completed life story books a significant time after their adoption order has been made. This means that these children are not getting the help they may need to make sense of their history.

The authority's letter box arrangements are effective and this results in more consistent contact arrangements between children and their birth families. The new permanence planning meetings process includes the early identification of who is to be responsible for undertaking life work and writing the child's later life letter. Although this process is not yet fully embedded it is clear that it will improve the quality, relevance and timeliness of the information needed to maintain children's heritage.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service aims to recruit diverse adopters to meet the different needs of children who need adoptive families. The authority's population is predominantly White British and additional, culturally sensitive support is provided for children from other ethnic backgrounds while the adoption process is being pursued. Assessments of prospective adopters provide a good consideration of the applicants' abilities to respect and promote diversity and to bring children up in a non-discriminatory manner. Assessments of adopters are prioritised based on their suitability to meet the particular needs of children waiting for families. The service provides effective adoption support for children and engages in working partnerships with other agencies to ensure that individual needs are met. It works with birth parents in a way that demonstrates respect and endeavours to engage them in the planning for their children.

The organisation has a Statement of Purpose in place which accurately sets out the service it provides. It is appropriately monitored and updated as necessary. There are different versions of the children's guide available for children for whom adoption is the plan. These different formats ensure that children are given information in a form that is appropriate to their needs and abilities.

The agency has an effective recruitment strategy that sets out its eligibility criteria and makes clear the needs of children looking for adoptive families. This strategy is based upon information about the needs of children waiting or for whom adoption may be the plan. This process allows the agency to prioritise adopters who can best meet the needs of the children needing families. The service responds to enquiries promptly and provides good information and counselling for prospective adopters.

Service management, at both strategic and operational levels, is effective and focussed on delivering positive outcomes for children. Senior managers have implemented clear strategic changes that improve planning for children and these have been reflected in strong operational provision. Managers have a good understanding of how adoption fits into the overall context of children's social care. The management and monitoring of the agency's activities is significantly strengthened since the last inspection and is now very effective. Reports on the operation of the adoption agency, submitted to the executive side of the council are appropriate. Councillors show a strong commitment to corporate parenting. The adoption service has an effective procedure for robustly assessing prospective adopters in a timely manner. However, this procedure does not follow the

regulations and guidance in that preparation training is provided to prospective adopters before an application to be assessed has been made. This has no negative impact upon outcomes for children. However, as preparation training is part of the assessment, applicants may lose their recourse to appeal or consideration by the Independent Review Mechanism should their assessment be discontinued before they have made an application.

Management and support for staff is of good quality. Workload management is effective in ensuring that the key functions of the adoption service are carried out well within the resources available. Adoption staff and their managers show a real commitment to children and undertake their work with creativity and enthusiasm. Management is supportive and allocates staffing resources as effectively as possible. The agency provides its staff with very good direct support. Training and development opportunities for staff are good with the agency supporting both internal and external training courses.

Case recording is good in both the files of adopters and prospective adopters and those of children. Files reflect the work done with children and adopters, are well structured and all documents are appropriately signed and dated. Clear evidence of quality assurance checks and case decisions is recorded on adopters and children's files. This means that files contain a clear and accurate record of all work done that aids decision making and provides a valuable source of future reference if required by a child in later life.

The agency operates from suitable premises with appropriate storage arrangements in place. Archived files are stored securely and protected from fire and flood under an appropriate contract with an independent organisation. The agency does not have a sufficiently specific disaster recovery plan that identifies how it will continue to provide services to children and adopters in emergency situations.

A robust recruitment process is followed in order to ensure that adoption workers are suitable people to work with vulnerable children. Records contain the required information to verify that this process is followed.

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):

- ensure that, before a match is agreed, adopters are given accurate, up-to-date and full written information about the child. Specifically, that child permanence reports are consistently of good quality (NMS 5.2)
- ensure that clear and appropriate information is obtained for children from their birth parents and families about themselves and their life before their adoption.

Specifically, that life story work is prepared and available to the child and adopters in a timely manner (NMS 8.2)

- develop the structures and systems to ensure assessments and approvals of prospective adopters are managed and implemented effectively. Specifically, that the procedures are reviewed to ensure that they are in line with the regulations and guidance (NMS 20.5)
- ensure that the adoption agency has a disaster recovery plan which will include both provision of premises and the safeguarding and backup of records. (NMS 29.5)