

Stockport MBC Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Sean White
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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

Stockport 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 adopters. 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 information exchange 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 outstanding.

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

This is a service that demonstrates a highly developed commitment to children and their futures through adoption; this commitment is also evident in all other aspects of its responsibilities in respect of all those affected by adoption.

The unequivocal and focused approach to ensuring that children are placed only with adopters who demonstrate the capacity to offer life-long, loving homes and the efforts made to secure this is outstanding. The care with which it approaches the matching of children with families is equally impressive.

Support to all those affected by adoption, regardless of background or circumstance, is provided within an holistic, seamless framework that ensures whoever requires support receives this, and this meets their needs. This includes birth families who are encouraged and welcomed to participate in the planning for their children's futures and maintaining their heritage to enable them to have as full an understanding of their backgrounds as possible.

All this is managed to an impressively high standard and undertaken by highly skilled workers. This ensures that the agency operates in a clear and focused way, is efficient in its processes and successful in its outcomes.

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency has taken a serious and conscientious approach to ensuring that all recommendations made following the last inspection have been addressed. Clearly

efforts have been made to meet all the shortfalls identified and there are now more consistent assessments, effective systems to monitor systems, and improve case recording and file management. The issues in respect of permanence reports are subject to continuous improvement and quality control.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

This is an agency that clearly demonstrates a commitment to the needs children; their safety and well-being are firmly established at the centre of its activities.

The agency has a clear strategy for recruiting and approving only the most suitable people to be adopters. There is a clear focus on ensuring that applicants fully understand the complexities of children's backgrounds and how this impacts on their futures through adoption. Matching is undertaken with great care and diligence through collaborative working and clarity of purpose. The service has an impressive record of successful matching demonstrated through a particularly low disruption rate.

Most significant is the agency's commitment and drive to ensure that children whose plan is for adoption do not wait for a placement longer than is necessary. Children are placed well within expected timescales in most cases, which demonstrates the agency's understanding of the importance of establishing children in loving, life-long placements at the earliest possible opportunity.

The preparation and assessment of prospective adopters is undertaken rigorously and with a clear focus on their ability to provide adoptive homes for children, many of whom have complex histories and circumstances. Workers demonstrate a thoroughness of approach, which in some cases necessitates significant detailed analysis of particularly challenging circumstances. This vigour and investigative skill is evident in much of the service's exploration of parenting capacity and ensures confidence in the suitability of those adopters who are approved. Applicants with complex histories are assessed in ways that recognises their individuality and heritage, with all necessary input from specialist sources, including interpreters.

The agency has a similarly impressive approach to the timeliness of assessing adopters as it has to the placement of children. There is little or no drift and applicants are very satisfied with the efficiency with which their cases are managed and progressed.

The adoption panel, which is suitably constituted, is very well managed and

undertakes its duties and responsibilities with great care and diligence. It scrutinises carefully and thoroughly the business brought before it and makes its recommendations only when fully satisfied they can be made with confidence and optimism. It undertakes its quality assurance responsibilities very carefully and is a significant partner in the continuous quest for service improvement. The administration, organisation and management of the panel processes is efficient, with excellent, informative minutes that enables decisions to be made from a fully informed standpoint. Those decisions are made in a conscientious and timely way.

The safety of children is promoted through robust staff recruitment and selection practices. Workers demonstrate significant skill in, and understanding of, contemporary thinking and practice in adoption work, and undertake their duties and responsibilities with flair and commitment. They are fully informed about legal processes, demonstrate significant knowledge of children's social care and share this with less experienced colleagues, which brings added value to the service overall.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The agency views adoption support as an integral part of the whole adoption continuum, rather than as a stand alone service. This ensures that there is an understanding and awareness of the importance of support to children and all others affected by adoption, including adopters, birth parents and adopted adults.

It is this inclusive approach that provides the service with a seamlessness that benefits the whole adoption process through a skilled and highly motivated support team. It uses a range of interventions and advice to enable families to function in the face of complex challenges. The team accesses specialist services to address particular issues and works closely with all stakeholders to provide a holistic, bespoke service to those in need.

Placement support is provided, in the main, by the assessing social worker. However, the close collaborative working with the support team ensures that there is a collective understanding of need and a joint commitment to positive outcomes in the longer term.

The service works closely with those referred to ensure that assessments of need are accurate and are based upon the insight of the service users into their own issues. Support is provided based on these assessments.

The service goes 'the extra mile' in many instances to provide support beyond that which is detailed in policies and procedures. This demonstrates a strong and ongoing commitment to adoption across the board and the importance the agency places on, and its commitment to, the well-being of children and other service users.

The agency has a well-established medical advisor who brings significant expertise and knowledge to the work of the service. It also enjoys excellent legal advice.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

There is strong encouragement of birth families to be as involved in the planning for their children's futures as possible. There is also a firm commitment to eliciting their views and acting upon them wherever possible, if it is in the child's best interests.

Every effort is made to enable birth parents to contribute to the information gathering to enable all adopted children to have well-presented and relevant life-story books. There is a cooperative approach to this process that ensures all children have life-story work available early in their placement. This, as with other aspects of the agency's approach to efficiency and timeliness, is excellent practice and demonstrates the service's commitment to children, their heritage and place in the world.

There are arrangements in place for all birth parents to have access to counselling and advice from an independent agency. There is also a strong focus in the support systems within the service to work closely with birth parents.

The arrangements for managing contact are well established and provide for children to be linked to their backgrounds. The management of the indirect contact arrangements also enables birth parents to have access to support and guidance in the maintaining of links with their children in appropriate and sensitive ways.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

This is a service that is managed to a high standard, both strategically and operationally, and supported by a well-informed executive and senior managers.

The service is informed by a detailed and well-presented Statement of Purpose that is underscored by a range of policies and procedures structured in a way that provides a clear framework for the agency's undertakings.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The agency's approach to all of its responsibilities is clearly aimed at providing a service based upon the particular and individual needs of people, regardless of their circumstances or backgrounds. This bespoke approach is evident throughout the agency and its interactions with everyone it comes into contact with, or offers a service to.

The strengths of the organisation are in its clarity of purpose and commitment to meeting the needs of children placed for adoption. It is an efficiently organised agency whose operations are guided by skilled and experienced managers. There is a clearly defined approach to monitoring quality of practice and process with mechanisms in place to improve continuously. Managers keep abreast of all activity and ensure the executive is fully informed of the service's practice and outcomes.

Workers are fully supported, encouraged and enabled to operate to the best of their ability. There is encouragement of individuality and innovative practice is welcomed; this enables staff to feel valued and further enhances commitment and motivation, which is significant. Workloads are manageable with care being taken to ensure allocation is equitable and utilises the skills and availability of workers to the best advantage of the service. The agency has managed the challenge of significant entitled leave periods in recent times, but has ensured the continuity of service provision admirably.

The agency is administered and organised to an impressively efficient standard. This includes the administration of processes, and the organisation and management of resources and facilities. Case files are of a high standard, audited for quality and content and maintained up to date; general administration is carried out in a way that effectively supports the overall work of the service and systems are in place to ensure confidentiality and security of records and information.

This service is managed to an outstanding standard. It does not rely on a demonstrative, gregarious exposition of its work, it relies more effectively on a subtle, focused approach that is clearly aimed at results and positive outcomes.