

Liverpool City 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

Liverpool City Council has a dedicated adoption team, which also includes a post adoption team that 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. In addition, the service carries out the matching, introduction, placement of children with domestic adopters, as well as support to these placements. The Council has commissioned a similar service for inter-country adopters from a local voluntary adoption agency.

An independent counselling and support service is provided to birth parents through commissioning arrangements with a voluntary adoption agency. This agency also operates and maintains a letter box system, which supports the exchange of information in adoption placements. In addition, It provides a birth records counselling and an intermediary service.

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 agency'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. In the main, the adoption service was meeting the adoption NMS and regulations. The outcome areas of staying safe, positive contribution and organisation were judged as good and enjoying and achieving was judged as outstanding.

The adoption service has a recruitment strategy, which promotes equality and diversity and is clearly based on an awareness of the children requiring adoption. The service is good at recruiting adopters and its practice is child focussed. However, the process for deciding whether a prospective adopter can make an application for an assessment is not formalised.

The service is thorough in its approach to the recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters and makes every effort to ensure children are kept safe. However, in one case an employment reference was not obtained, but this was effectively dealt with by the adoption panel.

Considerable thought is given to the effective matching of children and adopters. Children are matched with adopters who are suitable to meet their needs. The

matching processes and documentation are of a good standard.

The council's safeguarding policy and procedures are good; however, they do not contain a specific reference to a child placed for adoption.

Adoption support services are based on a person's assessed and holistic needs, with services effectively designed to meet them. Good matching and highly, qualitative support to adoptive families ensures that the service has a low disruption rate.

The service makes real efforts to engage birth parents in the care planning process and encourages them to provide information about their child's backgrounds and contribute to the child's heritage. There are good contractual arrangements in place for independent support to birth families.

The approach to life-story work and preparing information about the child and his birth family's history has a high priority. Considerable work has been undertaken to improve the quality of the child permanence report (CPR). However, while some improvements in the CPRs have been effected, these assessments are still of variable quality. Life work is increasingly being carried out in a timely manner and the life story book produced to a good standard.

Adopters are encouraged and supported wherever possible, to meet with birth parents. The agency seeks to plan, support and facilitate direct and indirect contact between birth families and a child, providing it is in their best interests to do so. The service commissions a voluntary adoption agency to administer its letterbox system and assistance with letterbox contact is available. This agency also provides a counselling and intermediary service. Respect and equality is provided to all those involved in the adoption process.

The adoption policies, procedures and the literature for adopters promote equality and diversity and this is clearly reflected in the service's practice. However, the children's guide does not contain all the required information.

The managerial team have considerable child care and adoption experience. It is a well managed service, with good, administrative systems to support their work. Both the adoption management team and staff work co-operatively with their colleagues in the child care teams to achieve good outcomes for children and young people.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last full inspection was carried out in June 2007 and resulted in six recommendations being made. These related to three of the key outcome areas, staying safe, enjoying and achieving and organisation.

The service had made considerable efforts to address these matters, which has resulted the adoption panel promoting good practice across the service. It has reviewed the in house adoption support services and as a consequence, developed a post adoption support team. A tracking system has also been developed to ensure

that the adoption process for prospective adopters complies with the timescales laid out in the statutory guidance and this is clearly recorded and reported upon. Supervisors' case decisions are now recorded on file and are signed and dated. The administrative support provided to the service has been reviewed. However, one recommendation relating to the safeguarding policy and procedures, specifically referring to a child placed for adoption remains outstanding.

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 is a child-focused service. It is very committed to placing children with the most appropriate families, who are able to meet their needs and keep them safe. Its recruitment strategy is extremely successful and as a result there is a steady flow of prospective adopters wishing to be assessed and approved. The service has a system in place to prioritise applicants, who are most likely to meet the needs of children requiring adoptive families. Since the last inspection, the service has had only one adoption disruption, which demonstrates a successful approach to careful and considered matching.

There is a formal preparation, assessment and approval process of domestic adopters, however applications are not taken prior to preparation courses. The service's approach to preparing and assessing prospective adopters is thorough and undertaken with a commitment to ensuring people are suitable to provide homes for children. Preparation training is comprehensive and based on sound practices and contemporary thinking in adoption. Adopters speak highly of the training and this demonstrates the service's determination and commitment to providing applicants with a firm foundation for their adoption journey.

There are clear processes and procedures in place to handle domestic adoption enquiries and follow up any expressions of interest; these are compatible with the service's equal opportunities and anti-discriminatory practice guidance. Liverpool has commissioned a voluntary adoption service to provide an inter-country adoption service. Adopters confirmed that the information they had received regarding the adoption process was useful and had met their needs.

Adopters' assessments are generally 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. The service also obtains written references in relation to the adopters, employer references and checks with applicants' former partners. In one case

though, an employment reference was not sought, however this was addressed at the adoption panel. The service ensures adopters are able to look after children in a safe manner through the use of a health and safety checklist.

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 going to the adoption panel to check for accuracy and to make comments. Adopters stated that their report presented an accurate and realistic picture of them and had been provided in the required legislative timescale.

Adopters receive written information regarding the matching, introductory and placement processes. Information is also provided regarding the National Adoption Register. This information is reinforced to adopters throughout the adoption process.

The family finding and matching process is generally well managed, with everyone working together to ensure the best outcome for children. Families are provided with information about children, which enables them to consider the appropriateness of the match.

The adoption panel has a clearly written set of policies and procedures, which govern its function, operation and contains all the required information. Adopters are invited to attend the adoption panel, with good preparatory work undertaken with them, prior to their attendance. The adoption 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 and clearly state the panel's discussion, its conclusions and the recommendations.

Adopters stated that both the chairperson and panel members were welcoming, made real efforts to put them at ease and 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 personally signed by the ADM and sent out within the necessary timescales.

Staff recruitment practices ensure children are effectively protected. The managers and staff working within the adoption service are appropriately qualified and have considerable experience, knowledge and skills in childcare and adoption work. They demonstrate a commitment to the well-being of adopted children and have a very good understanding of adoption matters in their widest context and are clearly fully informed about current practice. Staff in the children's services value the expertise of the adoption team and use them on a consultative basis.

There is a safeguarding policy and procedures; however, these do not include specific reference to children placed for adoption. 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 outstanding.

Liverpool has an extremely strong commitment to supporting their adopters, which has resulted in the development of multi-agency, integrated adoption support services. These support services are available at all stages of the adoption process, which enables adoptive parents to provide stable and permanent homes for their children.

Its range of support services are extensive and include support from staff during the matching, introduction and placement of a child with their adoptive family. Financial support packages, a news letter, social events, a buddy scheme and a support group. Internal and external training is also available.

Good working relationships exist between the adoption service and other services within the council. This enables adoptive families to access a variety of other specialist services to meet their needs, for example, the provision of additional educational support to a child. There is also a good relationship with the looked after children's, child and adolescent mental health team (CAHMS), enabling adoptive families to access this service, if required. However, the service will commission specialist individual therapy for an adoptive family, if necessary. The service has access to an impressive range of specialist advisers all of whom are extremely committed to their work and provide an excellent service to adopters at all stages of the adoption process.

This effective multi-agency working ensures the service is able to offer a range of complex packages of support. These are individually designed to meet the family's assessed and holistic needs and are provided in a creative and flexible way.

In addition, to these support services, the agency has commissioned the services of an adoption support agency. This service provides a helpline; counselling and support groups are available to all adopters and their children, who live in the area. It has also commissioned a voluntary agency, which specialises in inter-country adoption and provides support services to them.

Adopters are made aware of the support services available at an early stage in their contact with the agency. Adoption placement plans and children's adoption care plans are well written. Adoption support plans are of a good standard and distributed in a timely manner. Any requests for support are responded to promptly and provided in an extremely sensitive and thoughtful manner. Adopters state that the support provided is excellent. There is also a real confidence amongst adopters, who have not required support, that should such support be required in the future, it will be provided.

The adoption service's practice is very child focussed. This practice, together with the excellent support given to adoptive placements and the qualitative matching of children with adopters, has undoubtedly contributed to the promotion of stable and successful adoption placements.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

There is a clear, strategy for working with birth parents and their families. The service demonstrates a real commitment to such work and actively encourages and enables them to participate in the planning for their children's futures. At times their cooperation is difficult to maintain, however, it is clear that every effort is made to address this. Views of birth parents are sought and recorded in the CPRs. In situations where it is not possible to obtain their views, the reasons for this are fully recorded.

The agency has a contract with a voluntary adoption 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. However, the service makes real efforts 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 and the work is carried out in a thoughtful, sensitive manner. This contract is carefully monitored to ensure that it provides a qualitative service and value for money.

The service is committed to gathering information about children's backgrounds and encouraging birth families to contribute to their child's heritage. Consequently, considerable work has been undertaken to improve the quality of the CPRs. However, while some improvements in the CPRs have been effected, these assessments are still of variable quality. Some are not comprehensive, are not written in an inappropriate style and provide limited information regarding the birth parents. The service fully recognises the importance of ensuring life story work is undertaken with a child, high priority is given to this and work is increasingly being carried out in a timely manner and to a good standard.

Contact arrangements are well recorded. Direct contact is usually managed by the adopters; however, the service will provide support to adopters when the arrangements are difficult or complex. The service has commissioned a voluntary adoption agency to operate their letter box system, which manages all arrangements for indirect contact. 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. The service has also commissioned this agency to provide birth records counselling and intermediary services.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service ensures that the promotion of equality and diversity is reflected in their policies and practice. Prospective adopters' assessments address the applicants' views on disability, ethnicity and culture, both in terms of the types of children they are being assessed to adopt and their suitability to bring up children to have balanced, fair and non-discriminatory views. The agency works hard to find appropriately matched placements for children, taking into account their background or specific needs and provides extremely effective adoption support for children with complex needs. Respect for birth parents and their families is clearly demonstrated in their work and every effort is made to involve them in planning for their children's future.

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 a colourful, attractively presented children's guide which is in a user friendly format. However, this guide 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 about 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 those prospective adopters most likely to meet the needs of children waiting to be adopted, which is effectively communicated to them.

The managers of the agency have a wide experience, knowledge and understanding of social work with children and adoption. They are suitably qualified, and demonstrate management competence and expertise at both strategic and operational level. The managers are supported by a committed and enthusiastic cabinet office that monitors the work of the service very well.

The organisational arrangements for managing staff, their allocation of work and workload monitoring are of a good standard. Workers have a varied caseload and are allocated duties depending on capacity, expertise and interest. Supervision is regular and supportive, providing workers with an encouraging and developmental environment. This supportive infrastructure is evident throughout the agency with an overall enabling culture being the approach of the authority as a whole.

The service gives a high priority to training. Staff are encouraged and enabled to take up any training and development opportunities available. Staff are very positive about the range of training and professional development opportunities 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 and maintained. The records contained full, up-to-date and accurate information. Decisions by supervisors are recorded on case files and they are audited on a frequent basis.

There is a clearly written policy and procedure in place for accessing records, which meet the legislative requirements. The service ensures that separate records are kept for staff, and any allegations or complaints that are made. These records are well maintained, securely stored and retrieval of records are suitably organised.

Personnel and panel members files are well ordered, contain all the required information and are securely stored.

The premises occupied by the agency are well located. The arrangements for security and administration of the agency are well managed and it is suitably equipped with information technology and all necessary resources.

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 the application for the assessment of adopters is completed prior to the preparation training (breach of regulation, Part 4, 21, of the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005)
- ensure employers' references are obtained in accordance with government guidance (NMS 4.8)
- ensure the safeguarding policy and procedures include specific reference to children placed for adoption (breach of regulation L.A. Adoption service Regulations 2003)
- ensure clear and appropriate information is obtained about the child's life before adoption, with particular reference to the content of the child permanence report (NMS 8.2).
- 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)