

Gateshead 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

Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council adoption service undertakes or arranges all statutory adoption responsibilities under current legislation. This includes the recruitment, preparation and assessment and approval of adopters. It works in partnership with children's services to prepare, match and place children who have a plan for adoption with suitable parents. There is also a range of adoption support facilities for birth parents arranged through an adoption support agency and other resources for accessing support for all people who have been affected by adoption.

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, making a positive contribution and organisation. The adoption service's promotion of equality and diversity was also inspected. During the inspection, inspectors had contact with four adopted children, in person or by questionnaire, although their young age meant that consultation was not possible.

This is a good adoption service that operates with a clear focus on providing good outcomes for children through adoption. It is well managed strategically. It uses effective information systems to plan and direct adoption work. As a consequence children with a plan for adoption are provided with suitable, well-prepared and supported adopters in an impressively timely manner. The service provides prospective adopters with very good information and training. It undertakes careful and robust assessments of their suitability to adopt although it does not assess potential risks within the family home as well as it could.

Good information is provided about children when adoption plans are being considered. This helps ensure children are placed with closely matched families. The adoption panel carefully scrutinises assessments and plans for children. It makes very clear recommendations along with the reasons for these and this supports the effective decision-making process. However, siblings are the subject of one panel recommendation and later, one decision by the authority. This means that records of the individual decisions taken about each specific child are not available for their individual reference in later life.

The authority does not yet work as effectively as it could to support birth parents or to engage with them effectively to seek information to support the adoption process. Support is provided through an independent agency but birth parents are not always

informed of this early enough and referral arrangements have only recently been clarified. Life story work for children is an improving picture within the authority. Significant efforts are made to ensure that children are helped to understand their life story in a way that assists and supports their adoptive placements. However, life story books are often not completed for children in a sufficiently timely manner. The authority provides strong and creative support to people affected by adoption. Support for children and their adoptive families is provided based on their individual assessed needs and the service works effectively with other agencies to deliver this support.

Although the strategic management and monitoring adoption work is strong, the detailed quality assurance of practice and recording is not sufficiently developed. As a consequence records are at times unclear, conflicting or of inconsistent quality and do not always fully reflect the work undertaken. The authority recognises this and has plans in place to address this but these are yet to have effect.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection a number of recommendations were made to improve the adoption service.

The authority was asked to develop its processes for referral for family finding and the assessment of prospective adopters. It was recommended that sufficient staff with the right skills and competence were employed in the agency. It was asked to develop a more consistent approach to the writing of child permanence reports and to promote the importance of life story work with children. It was also asked to monitor the support service provided by commissioned agencies more effectively.

The adoption service has addressed these recommendations.

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 knows the needs of children waiting or those who may have a plan for adoption. It uses this knowledge to ensure that it assesses and approves adopters who can meet these needs. The suitability of people to adopt is considered on an inclusive basis based on the needs of children irrespective of applicants' race, sexuality, disability or marital status.

The preparation, training and assessment of prospective adopters is undertaken with

care, thoroughness and attention to detail. However, assessments of potential health and safety risks to children present in adopters' homes are not well enough or widely enough assessed to minimise the risk of harm. Assessment 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. The application and assessment process is managed in such a way as to minimise delay for applicants. Adopters speak highly of this process. One said, 'We have felt supported all the way through.' Preparation training includes input from adoptive parents, foster carers and a birth relative. This training is of high quality and valued by adopters.

The authority operates a planning process which seeks to identify, at an early stage, those children for whom adoption may be the plan. This information is generally shared very effectively with the adoption team. This enables plans to be developed early and potential matches to be considered. Adoption and field social work staff work together well to find adoptive families and arrange matches between children and adopters. The authority works closely 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. There is a clear process in place to make these matching decisions. As a consequence the authority's children who require adoptive families are matched and placed with suitable, well prepared and well-matched adopters in an impressively timely manner.

Child permanence reports are generally of good quality and assist the matching process well. However, the content and style of the information contained is not always fully suitable for a child's reference in later life. The authority's quality monitoring procedures are not sufficiently well developed to identify and address this in every case. The adoption panel is correctly constituted and well managed. It undertakes its responsibilities with care and rigour. It is thorough in its consideration of reports submitted and does its best to make applicants who are attending panel feel at their ease. It makes clear recommendations and records the reasons for these very well. The administration of the panel enables business to be conducted in a timely way. Decision making is prompt and well informed which ensures children have the most suitable placements in adoptive families.

However, in situations where panel is considering whether siblings should be placed for adoption it makes one recommendation relating to the sibling group. The agency decision is also recorded in the same manner. This means that, in later life, individual children will not have reference to a record of the detailed discussion and decision that took place specifically in relation to them.

The authority's recruitment procedures ensure that staff and panel members who work for the purposes of the adoption service are suitable people with the appropriate qualifications to carry out their roles. Adoption staff understand adoption and clearly focus on promoting the well-being of children. The managers and staff of the agency are all suitably experienced.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Support to people affected by adoption is an important and developing aspect of the service's operation. The authority's arrangements for supporting adoptive placements are good. Children and adopters receive good support throughout the introduction process and after placements are made. Visits to children with their adoptive families take place and reviews are timely. This ensures that placements are well reviewed and supported. Adoption placement plans and children's adoption support plans underpin this support and set out any needs present.

The service recognises the importance that support plays in achieving successful placements and outcomes. It provides support and training to help adopters to manage and understand the complex and challenging needs of children. The service works well with other agencies to provide support to children and their adoptive families including therapeutic services, children's mental health services and health and education services. Support strategies are individually tailored and help adopted children to settle into their new families and cope with difficulties they may experience.

Support to people affected by adoption, including birth records counselling, intermediary work and birth parent support is provided by the service and by a commissioned service with an adoption support agency. The authority has good monitoring arrangements that ensure appropriate levels of service are being provided through commissioned agencies. The letterbox arrangements for maintaining contact between adopted children and their birth families are managed effectively despite the growing number of contacts handled by this letterbox. The adoption team includes a children's worker who is able to undertake or support life work with children to help them understand their situation.

Specialist advice and support resources are readily accessible. Medical advice and support provided to the agency and adopters is of excellent quality. The medical adviser meets all adopters and children and plays a significant role in ensuring placements meet children's needs. Advice is provided to inform all areas of adoption decision making. 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 satisfactory.

The service recognises the significance of children's backgrounds and histories. It understands the significance they have in children's understanding of themselves and their place in the world. It has arrangements in place to support birth parents and to engage them in providing information and their views to support the adoption process. However, these are not consistently implemented or recorded. At times good work is undertaken to engage with birth parents but this is not reflected in child

permanence reports. As such this information will not be accessible to children in later life. In other situations it is unclear whether sufficient work has been done. As a consequence plans are often submitted to panel for consideration without clear information from birth parents.

Similarly, support provided and offered to birth parents is not consistently recorded. Records often do not make clear how support has been offered. At times records state that information about independent support has not been offered at the time the match has been made. The service's quality monitoring arrangements with respect to detailed practice and recording are not well developed enough or integrated and as a consequence have not addressed some of these issues sufficiently. As a consequence children's records do not always contain enough information from their birth parents for them to refer to in later life. Additionally, birth parents may not be receiving the support they are entitled to at a very difficult time in their lives. The service has identified there are inconsistencies in practice in this area and has robust plans in place to improve this work.

The agency regards life story work for children being adopted as important. Since the last inspection a significant drive has taken place to ensure that adopted children receive life story work to help support their placements. The adoption team has a children's worker who is available to support social workers to complete this work with children or to work with children directly. There is a high demand for this service which demonstrates its success. The worker is also available to work with children for whom adoption is the plan to help them prepare. The service continues to place a priority on life work being carried out in order to maintain successful adoptive placements. However, life story books are often not ready to pass on to adopters in a sufficiently timely manner. For example during the inspection it was noted that two adopters had not received children's life story books despite the adoption order being made. In another situation an older child who would benefit from having a life story book to refer to has not received this some months after the placement was made. This means that children's ability to understand their past experiences is not supported well enough. Commendably, as in the examples above, many foster carers provide adopters with excellent memory boxes and books containing information, mementos and photographs of children's lives with them.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service recruits adopters from a diverse range of backgrounds to meet the different needs of children who need adoptive families. Assessments of prospective adopters consider applicants' abilities

to respect and promote diversity. Information for prospective adopters can be provided in different languages. Preparation training is delivered in a way that challenges prejudice and preconception. The service works hard to ensure that children are matched with adopters who are able to meet their needs and where possible reflect their background and heritage. The authority strives to locate the most appropriate family for each individual child whether these are from within the authority or elsewhere.

The organisation has a Statement of Purpose in place which accurately sets out in detail the service it provides. It is appropriately reviewed and updated as necessary. The children's guide is made available to children for whom adoption is the plan. This is colourful and well presented but is unsuited to the needs of younger children or those with learning disabilities. As such these children are not assisted to understand the adoption process as well as they could be.

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 good, early information about the needs of children waiting or for whom adoption may be the plan. The service responds to enquiries promptly and provides good information and counselling for prospective adopters.

The management of the adoption service, at a strategic level, is effective. Adoption processes are well monitored and managed and this ensures that children with a plan for adoption are found suitable and well-prepared families in an impressively timely manner. Management and support for staff are of good quality. Effective workload management ensures that, despite the pressure on the service, the key functions of the adoption service operate well. Adoption staff and their managers are committed to their roles and work to a high standard. The service provides its staff with very good direct support. Training and development opportunities for staff are good with access to both internal and external training courses.

However, processes for the management and quality control of the detailed, day-to-day, adoption work and recording are not effective enough. Throughout the inspection a number of examples were noted that demonstrate the lack of a cohesive and effective quality monitoring system. For example, some records contained information which conflicted with other documents relating to the same child, some did not adequately evidence the work done and others recorded that important work was not carried out. Additionally some records contained sensitive third party information that should have been removed. In these cases errors had not been identified despite the existence of various points in the process where these should have been identified. This could limit a child's future understanding of the work done to manage his or her adoption, as well as making planning more difficult. Positively, the authority has already identified this and has put steps in place to improve the situation. A system of file audits is taking place for all adoption files. Additionally the line management arrangements of the adoption service are being restructured to allow a more integrated and cohesive quality monitoring system to be developed.

Effective arrangements exist to ensure that any records relating to children's

adoption are maintained with appropriate confidentiality. The agency operates from suitable premises with appropriate storage arrangements in place. Archived files are stored securely.

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 assessments consider all potential risks present within prospective adopters' homes (NMS 4.6)
- ensure that panel recommendations and agency decisions are made in respect of each individual child for whom adoption decisions are being made (NMS 13.1)
- ensure that consistent arrangements are in place to support birth parents and gain information from them for the adoption process (NMS 7.2)
- ensure that good quality life story books are prepared in a timely manner for all children (NMS 8.2)
- ensure that the children's guide is suitable for all children for whom adoption is the plan (NMS 1.4)
- develop a cohesive and consistent process for monitoring the quality of all adoption work undertaken and reports produced. (NMS 17.1)