

St Helens Metropolitan Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Sue Winson / Helen Norry
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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

St Helens 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. In addition, the service has case responsibility for the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters and the support of adoptive placements. The service operates and maintains a letter box system, which supports the exchange of information in line with indirect contact agreements.

An independent counselling and support service is provided to birth parents, birth families, adopters and adopted adults through commissioning arrangements with a voluntary adoption agency. The council commissions a service for inter-country adopters from a local voluntary adoption agency.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This announced inspection considered all the national minimum standards under the four outcome areas of staying safe, enjoying and achieving, positive contribution and organisation. It is a good service with some very strong aspects and has an ongoing improvement agenda. The adoption service has a clear commitment to ensuring that children are matched and placed, in a timely way, with the most suitable adopters to meet their needs. Adoption panels are presented with well written assessment reports that are evidence based, analytical and focus on applicants' abilities to parent. Adopters and children are well supported during introductions and placements and families benefit from creative and flexible post adoption support. Birth parents are viewed as important in the adoption process, their contributions are valued and they are supported to maintain contact through the efficiently run letterbox system. Arrangements are in place for them to receive independent support.

The adoption team and managers are very well experienced, suitably qualified and receive good quality training and support. They have a solid working relationship with colleagues across children's services and are valued and respected for their skills and knowledge. This co-operative approach works to minimise delays for children and has led to improvements in the quality of information provided for them to access later in life. One recommendation has been made in respect of full enquiries being undertaken on all prospective adopters.

Improvements since the last inspection

Two actions resulted from the last inspection and the service has acted upon these. The children's guide now contains all the required information and panel member's files now include full employment histories and proof of identity. Similarly the five recommendations made have been addressed in full. The reasons for the panel's recommendations are clearly recorded in summary at the end of the minutes. There is evidence of telephone verification of references and employment histories are routinely explored during staff recruitment. There are no breaches of confidentiality in files. A lot of work has been carried out to ensure that life story book production is carried out in a timely way. This is evidently an improving service with a focus on future developments to maintain and build on good practice in order to achieve positive outcomes for children.

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 has a written recruitment plan to provide sufficient adopters to meet the needs of children locally. Good communication between the adoption team and social work teams ensures that the adoption service is well informed about children for whom adoption is likely to be the plan. This information informs the recruitment strategy and allows for prioritisation of potential adopters assessments. Well-established working arrangements with two nearby local authorities allows for access to adopters for children who cannot be placed within the geographically small borough. Where necessary placements outside of the north west are accessed in order to meet children's needs and arrangements are in place to secure funding without delay.

Children are placed with families who reflect their ethnic origin, culture and language. A small number of children have not been placed with their brothers or sisters due to individual need assessment and reasons for this are documented. The service has been successful in placing older children, children with disabilities, sibling groups and those whose future is uncertain. Where possible children's views are taken into account and the views of potential adoptive parents are consistently included in adoption placement reports.

Placements are made in a largely timely manner and where there have been delays the service are aware of the reasons, some of which are outside of their direct control. The manager attends meetings with the local judiciary and legal adviser to highlight any concerns about court issues. Case responsibility for the children is held by the adoption team once placement orders have been gained. Prior to this

excellent communication with the looked after children team ensures that delays are minimised. Introductions and placements are well managed taking into account the needs of individual children. The introduction of pre-panel matching meetings ensures that full information is shared with potential adoptive parents.

The service has worked to improve the quality of child permanence reports by raising awareness with workers in the assessment and looked after children teams of the importance of capturing information and photographs, at early stages, for an adopted child in later life. This has been successful and the quality and quantity of information is improving. Routinely, child permanence reports contain good quality photographs of the child and family members and work has been undertaken to ensure that the language used is appropriate.

Clear processes are in place to manage enquiries and applications from prospective adopters which are congruent with the agency's equal opportunities and anti-discriminatory practice. Social workers carry out thorough initial visits to enquirers which are used to assess their potential and to allow for prioritisation to meet the needs of children waiting. Application forms are completed prior to preparation groups. The service is able to offer preparation groups every eight weeks due to their arrangements with two neighbouring authorities. In discussions with adopters it is evident that the groups are effective in informing them about adoption practice and preparing them to meet children's needs. Feedback is sought from attendees, which is largely positive and which informs future reviews and development of the course. The agency has a contract with an agency to handle inter-country adoptions and the service provided is monitored.

The team carries out thorough assessments which include analysis of information with emphasis on applicants' potential to parent and their ability to meet children's needs. Checks, including with the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) are taken up prior to panel and there is evidence of in-depth interviews with family members and personal referees. Full local authority checks are taken up for addresses for the last ten years, however, on one occasion an address was overlooked. Adopters commented positively on the process and are well aware of why the assessments need to be so thorough. They have the assessment document prior to panel to check for accuracy and to make comments. Health and safety checks are completed during the assessment of adopters, however there is no written evidence that identified actions have been taken, or that they are reviewed to take into account the needs of specific children.

Panel policies and procedures are comprehensive and carried out in practice. There is an independent panel chair and the members have a range of experience of adoption and childcare. The meetings are well chaired and all members contribute. The specific remits of specialist advisors are outlined in writing. Annual appraisals take place. Adopters are invited to attend panel and are largely positive in their comments about being prepared and put at ease. The functioning of the panel is efficiently organised and conducted. Information is sent out to members in a secure way and comprehensive minutes reflect the discussion, the reasons for the panel's recommendations are clearly summarised. The quality assurance role of panel is

effective and the panel chair, the Agency Decision Maker and adoption manager communicate well and meet formally to discuss issues. The Agency Decision Maker has access to the case information and panel minutes. A large majority of decisions are made in a timely manner and all relevant parties are informed in writing.

The manager and staff are suitable to work with children and systems are in place to ensure that CRB checks are renewed every three years. Written policies and procedures are carried out in practice to ensure safe recruitment of staff. Telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify the written references.

Appropriate safeguarding policies are in place which promote the welfare of service users. Child protection procedures include clear guidance for staff where children are placed for adoption or have been adopted, and refers the reader to procedures for dealing with allegations.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service has a strong approach to providing effective support to adoptive families from early stages in line with written policies and procedures. Written plans for adoption support are in place and they outline clearly the support needed by individual families and how it will be provided. Examples were given which demonstrate the service's ability to be flexible and innovative in supporting families. Post approval training is available to adopters where needed, including courses on attachments. The authority's LAC educational psychologist provides training and consultation for adoption social workers. Support groups and fun days allow adopters to meet with others and the team.

The adoption service has good access to specialist advisers. The medical adviser is available for consultation by staff or potential adopters and is a member of the adoption panel. She and the legal adviser to panel have clear protocols covering their roles. The managers and social workers were positive about their contributions.

People affected by adoption receive a service that is appropriate and tailored to their needs. This is achieved through the commissioning of services from a local provider. The arrangements are underpinned by a written agreement which is regularly reviewed. The services provided are monitored by the adoption service through regular written reports.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

There is a clear strategy for working with and supporting birth parents before and after adoption. They are informed when families are identified and when children are placed. Social workers are committed to engaging birth families in the adoption process. A contract with a voluntary agency provides a range of services which

includes counselling to birth parents and families and they are provided with leaflets outlining the services available. Their views on adoption are included in child permanence reports, and in some cases, these are handwritten by them. The social workers make efforts to gain information from birth parents and families for the child in later life.

The service has employed life work co-ordinators for the last year and as a result the majority of children now have life story books and, where appropriate, life story work has been carried out with them. Adopters have commented positively on the value of the work and the books. The service has raised awareness about collecting photographs and information early on in the planning process to inform life story work. Foster carers in the authority are skilled in maintaining information for children, including mementos, and in moving them on to adoptive parents.

Adopters are prepared for one-off meetings with birth parents and understand the value of maintaining letterbox contact. Systems are in place for the management of the letterbox and assistance is provided to adopters and birth families in writing the letters. Examples include the successful maintenance of complex indirect contact arrangements.

Post adoption support service users receive a good quality professional service, based on their needs identified by an assessment. Policies and procedures are followed in practice and people receive services in a timely manner. The service is flexible and wide ranging; where appropriate people are referred on to other services within the borough. Examples were given where the adoption team has worked effectively with young people and their families to prevent disruptions.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Promoting equality and non-discriminatory practice runs through policies and procedures. Social workers, panel members and adopters receive training on all issues relating to equality and diversity. Information on the council's website about adoption makes clear applicants with be welcomed without prejudice. Support provided to children and adopters is tailored to their individual needs. Care is taken when writing reports to ensure that the language used is appropriate, and the adoption team have produced guidance on explaining difficult issues to children, which social workers value.

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 guide contains all the required information.

The adoption team manager has considerable experience, knowledge and skills and staff are positive about her leadership role and style. Lines of accountability, responsibilities and levels of delegation are in place and are known to the staff. Staff are well supported and supervised in their work. They are experienced, enthusiastic and open to new ideas and improving outcomes for children. The team's administrative staff are integral to the team and provide effective support. All managers have a strong commitment to adoption and there are links at all levels to other social work teams and services within the authority. Good communication is evident and there is a clear improvement agenda.

Systems are in place for the monitoring of the adoption service. Services for children for whom adoption is the plan are continuously monitored and scrutinised. The service can demonstrate that assessments of adopters are carried out within reasonable timescales. Information is provided to the executive side of the council on a regular basis. Communication is effective and the member with lead responsibility is very well informed about adoption and services for children in general.

Case records are well organised and safely stored to maintain confidentiality. Decisions made in consultation with supervisors are clearly documented and signed. A contract is in place to ensure safe storage of archived records. The premises are suitable for purpose and provide sufficient space and equipment.

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 full enquiries are undertaken about all prospective adopters. (NMS 4)