

Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Marian Denny
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Setting address	Astley House, Astley Road, LIVERPOOL, L36 8HY
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Telephone number	0151 4433928
Email	sue.sloan@knowsley.gov.uk
Registered person	Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council
Registered manager	Sue Sloan
Responsible individual	Kitty Ferris
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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

Knowsley 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 service also undertakes the approval of non-agency 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. The service operates and maintains a letter box system, which supports the exchange of information in adoption 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 also provided to birth parents, their families and adopted adults through commissioning arrangements with a voluntary adoption agency.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

The was an announced inspection. All the Adoption National Minimum Standards (NMS) were addressed under the four outcome areas of staying safe, enjoying and achieving, positive contribution and organisation, which were judged as satisfactory.

The service has a recruitment strategy, however this does not fully address the needs of children waiting to be adopted. However, due to a positive working relationship with the regional adoption consortium, as well as the National Adoption Register (NAR) the service is able to facilitate an effective match of a child with adopters.

Prospective adopters do not complete a written application prior to the commencement of preparation training and assessment. The service though generally undertakes good prospective adopters' assessments, however there is some inconsistency in relation to their quality.

Children's feelings and views regarding their adoption plans are not always recorded. However children are matched with adopters who are suitable to meet their needs. The matching processes and documentation are of a good standard, though child permanence reports are of variable quality. The service has a disruption policy and

procedures. However, these are not always completed within the timescales specified by the service's policy and procedures.

The adoption panel is rigorous in its scrutiny of cases and ensures full information is obtained in respect of the cases presented. In situations, where such information is not presented to the panel, the case is appropriately deferred. However the service has not arranged on an annual basis, a joint training day for panel members and the agency's adoption staff. The service provides a satisfactory range of support services to adopters, both pre and post order. Contractual arrangements are in place for the assessment and support of inter-country adopters.

The authority is committed to obtaining information about children's backgrounds and works hard to encourage birth families to contribute to their child's heritage. Life story work is carried out in a timely manner and the life story book produced to a high standard. Contractual arrangements are in place for independent support to birth families. Adopters are encouraged and supported, wherever possible, to meet with birth parents. It also seeks to plan, support and facilitate direct and indirect contact between birth families and children, when it is in the child's best interests to do so. There is a letterbox system and assistance with letterbox contact is available.

The adoption policies, procedures and the literature for adopters have been revised in accordance with current adoption legislation. These documents promote equality and diversity and this is reflected in the service's practice.

The managerial team have experience in child care and adoption experience. The service is managed to a satisfactory standard and there are good administrative systems supporting their work. However, quality assurance systems used by the service are not sufficiently robust. Whilst case records are generally of a good standard, however, a small percentage breach confidentiality. The system for keeping records of complaints does not always record the details of the investigation, conclusion reached and action taken in relation to the complaint.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last full inspection was carried out on 19/11/2008 and resulted in one action and two recommendations being made.

The service had made efforts to address these matters. However the quality assurance systems are not robust and a further recommendation has been made regarding this. Similarly, the issue in relation to breaches of confidentiality in agency records were also identified in this inspection and a further recommendation has been made regarding this. In addition, a recommendation regarding records of complaints has been made which specifies the necessary recording of a complaints' investigation, the conclusion reached and action taken.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The service has a recruitment strategy, though this does not fully address the needs of children waiting to be adopted. However, the service has a positive working relationship with their regional adoption consortium. The National Adoption Register (NAR) is also used and the service also takes part in adoption exchange days to facilitate an effective match of a child with adopters. This has increased the service's ability to match children with adopters.

There are clear processes and procedures in place to handle domestic adoption enquiries and follow up any expressions of interest which are compatible with the agency's equal opportunities and anti-discriminatory practice. Knowsley refers inter-country adopters to a voluntary adoption agency which it has commissioned to provide this specialist service.

A formal process is in place for the preparation, assessment and approval of adopters. However, agency records do not evidence that the counselling stage has been carried out, nor is the suitability decision recorded. Applications are also taken after preparation courses have commenced.

Adopters' assessments are generally of a good standard, in so far as they are thorough, analytical and cover such issues as parenting capacity, life experiences, the impact of adoption and support networks well. Views of birth and adopted children are also obtained regarding their parents' decision to adopt. However, not all assessments are of this standard, for example, in one assessment there was insufficient exploration of an applicant's life experiences and likely impact on their parenting capacity. Written references in relation to the adopters are carried out and checks with applicants' former partners are undertaken. In one case though an employer's reference had not been obtained. The necessary enquiries and statutory checks in relation to prospective adopters and other members of the household, who are aged 16 years or over are usually obtained. However, in one case a local authority check had not been completed. In both these cases, this resulted in the panel being unable to consider the prospective adopters' approval and deferring the matter until these issues were addressed. The agency though does ensure adopters are able to look after children in a safe manner through the use of a comprehensive health and safety checklist.

Children are matched to adopters, who best meet their assessed needs and every effort is made to ensure siblings are placed together, if this is assessed as appropriate. The service has been successful in placing older children and large

sibling groups. Children's views regarding family finding are not always taken into account, even when they are of an age and ability to do so. Introductions and placements are usually well managed and mid-point reviews take place. Adopters are involved in the matching process and their views are included in adoption placement reports. The medical adviser and other professionals involved with the children talk with adopters or attend meetings to provide full information.

The authority has worked hard to improve the quality of the child permanence reports and staff have been provided with relevant training. However, despite this the reports are of variable quality, with some containing comprehensive information, whilst others lack such detail, for example, not all include the wishes and feelings of the child or that of birth parents and family members. In others there is limited information regarding the birth parents, even though the service knows them well.

Panel policies and procedures are in place which meet the NMS and Regulations. Adopters are invited to attend the adoption panel and good preparatory work is 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. Training is provided to panel members, however the annual joint training day for panel members and adoption staff has not been held every year.

Panel is well organised and effectively chaired. Panel members are well prepared, make appropriate observations and ask relevant questions. Panel minutes are informative, clearly state the panel's discussion, with reasons for the panel's conclusions and recommendations recorded.

The agency's decision maker ensures all information relating to a case, as well as the panel minutes are thoroughly scrutinised before making a decision. Notifications of the decision are always sent out within the necessary timescales.

The manager and staff working for the service are appropriately qualified and experienced in their work. Staff recruitment practices are robust.

There is a safeguarding policy and procedure which fully meets the adoption NMS and Regulations. There is a record system in place to enable staff to record safeguarding issues effectively. Those working in the service are supported to handle and manage safeguarding issues.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is satisfactory.

The service has satisfactory arrangements in place to support adoptive parents and their children. These services are provided in a variety of ways, for example, some services such as educational support and play therapy are provided in-house. Whilst others are provided in partnership with a local voluntary adoption agency or other external services, such as the child and adolescent mental health services. In certain

circumstances the service will also, if necessary, commission individual therapy for an adoptive family.

The support services provided include financial support packages, for example, settling-in grants and adoption allowances. Due to the lack of a dedicated post adoption support worker and past staffing shortages, no newsletters are provided, nor does the service provide social events or their own support groups for adopters. However the service does provide some support groups, as well as access to a helpline and a counselling service through commissioning arrangements with a local voluntary adoption agency. Internal and external training is also provided, for example, on attachment, loss and bereavement. The family support worker within the adoption team works with adopters to ensure they develop a good understanding of the importance of maintaining a child's identity. Guidance and assistance is also provided to adopters and children about writing letters under letterbox agreements. Knowsley has commissioned a voluntary agency to provide an inter-country adoption service to those people wishing to adopt a child from overseas.

Adopters are made aware of the support services available at an early stage in their contact with the agency. Adoption placement plans and support plans are of a satisfactory standard. Requests for support are generally responded to promptly.

The service has access to a variety of specialist advisers and there are written protocols in place regarding their roles. Specialist advisers are used to support adopters, for example, adopters are able to see the medical adviser, if required. Social workers and adopters were complimentary about their contacts with specialist advisers.

There are appropriate systems in place for people affected by adoption to receive services which are designed to meet their assessed needs. Any adoption service commissioned by the agency is supported by a written agreement, which is regularly reviewed. This ensures the service provided is of the required qualitative standard and is able to meet the needs of the agency and its service users.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The adoption service tries to engage birth parents in planning for their children's futures, birth parents views about adoption and contact are not always obtained or recorded in the child permanence reports.

Knowsley 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. This contract is carefully monitored to ensure that it provides a qualitative service and value for money.

The adoption service also provides an opportunity for the birth and adoptive parents

to meet. This enables adopters to receive information from the birth parents, first hand and can provide them with a firm basis for future contact arrangements. These meetings are prepared for carefully, sensitively handled and generally well managed.

Knowsley has a commitment to gathering information about children's backgrounds and encouraging birth families to contribute to their child's heritage. The service fully recognises the importance of ensuring life work with a child and the production of a life story book is undertaken in a timely manner and to a good standard. Life story books are routinely used to prepare a child for adoption.

There are a limited number of direct contact arrangements, however, the service will provide adopters with support, where the arrangements are difficult or complex. Arrangements for indirect contact are managed through the letter box system. This is a robust system and is managed in an effective and efficient manner. It is evident that adopters are well 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. In addition to this, the agency provides a birth records counselling service. Experiences and learning derived from this work is used to inform adoption practice.

The agency has commissioned a voluntary adoption service to provide intermediary services. All commissioned services are underpinned by written agreements, which are carefully monitored to ensure the services are effective and provide value for money.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. The agency makes efforts to provide a service that values and supports people's differences and this underpinned by its policies and practice. The agency is non-discriminatory in considering the suitability of people to adopt. The agency focuses on the specific needs of children when considering matches with adopters. The service provides satisfactory support to children and adopters to maintain stable and permanent adoptive homes.

The adoption service has an up-to-date Statement of Purpose which clearly details the aims, objectives and the services provided. This document is supported by a range of policies and procedures which inform and underpin the strategic and operational direction of the agency. The service has colourful, attractively-presented children's guides which are in a user-friendly format and contains all the required information.

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 prospective adopters who are most likely to meet the needs of children waiting to be adopted and this is effectively communicated to adopters.

The service is currently managed by the Service Manager, who has the appropriate skills, qualifications and experience to manage the service. Staff spoke positively about both the manager, whom they stated had been supportive to them. Roles and lines of responsibility are clear.

There are a number of quality assurance systems in place to monitor the agency's performance. There are regular reports and meetings with elected members, which reflect their active corporate parenting role. Service managers also carefully monitor progress for under 10 year olds, where permanency decisions have been made and tracking meetings are held to discuss and monitor progress. The Adoption and permanency's panel's role in quality assurance is clear. However, whilst quality assurance at the strategic levels of the adoption service are robust, this is not the case at the operational level and some improvements are required.

Staff are clear about their roles, the lines of accountability and communication is good. Staff have knowledge, experience and skills in working with children and in adoption. They are encouraged and supported in their work. Staff acknowledged they receive regular supervision, both on an informal and formal basis. Administrative support is of a good standard and supports staff to carry out their work efficiently. However, the lack of a consistent manager and staff has significantly impacted on the development and delivery of service.

Whilst staff spoke positively about the range and quality of the training and professional development opportunities provided; capacity issues within the service were such that they had been unable to take advantage of many of the opportunities provided.

There are appropriate policies and procedures in place for case recording. Case records are well organised and maintained. However, in some files, the case records contain an inconsistency in supervisors' decisions being recorded on file. Some case records also breached confidentiality, as they contain legal information appertaining to another child.

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. However, in one file seen, there was no record of the meeting with the complainants and the manager of the service or the outcome of the investigation. The service though ensures all records are well maintained and securely stored. Personnel and panel members files are well ordered, securely stored and contain all the required information.

The premises occupied by the agency are well located. Arrangements for the 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):

- develop the recruitment strategy so that it effectively recruits adopters to meet the needs of the range of children requiring adoption (NMS 2.1)
- ensure that children's views and feelings are taken into account in the matching process (NMS 2.3)
- ensure prospective adopters complete a written application prior to the commencement of preparation training and assessment (breach of Regulation 22(1) of Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005)
- ensure prospective adopters' assessments are of a consistent qualitative standard (NMS 4)
- provide an annual joint training day for panel members and the agency's adoption staff (NMS 11.4)
- ensure the service's disruption policy is followed so effective information and support can be provided the adopters and child (NMS 6.7)
- improve the quality of child permanency reports and ensure birth parents' views about adoption and contact are clearly recorded (NMS 7.3 and 8.2)
- ensure robust quality assurance systems are implemented and maintained for all aspects of the adoption service (Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003, 7(a)(b))
- ensure that there are no breaches of confidentiality in agency records (NMS 26)
- ensure records of complaints include details of the investigation, conclusion reached and action taken. (NMS 27.6)