

Medway Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Margaret Lynes / Rossella Volpi
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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

Medway's adoption service assesses the needs of children for whom adoption is the plan. It also works with and supports birth parents through this process, and in doing so provides a number of services. These include the recruitment, preparation and assessment of adopters; matching adoptive parents to children; inter-country adoption assessments; counselling for birth parents; counselling and support for children for whom adoption is the plan; support and supervision for prospective adopters; support for adoptive families pre and post placement and order; the co-ordination of post-adoption contact arrangements and support and counselling for adults who have been adopted.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

At this announced full inspection, all key standards were inspected. Being Healthy and Economic Wellbeing were not inspected.

This is a good service in almost all areas, with some satisfactory features. The adoption service is generally well managed at all levels with a qualified, experienced and stable management team, able to work together well and with other managers in the integrated service. Staff feel valued, well supported and safe. They have access to regular and appropriate training.

A lot of thought has gone into service quality, and there is a commitment to an agenda of continuous improvement. Those touched by adoption are clear of what to expect from the service, and the service is well placed to maximise a child's life chances and expectations and to ensure that prompt and suitable permanency solutions are found.

The agency recognises that it needs to give better prominence to issues of culture, diversity and equality, and is taking steps to achieve this. Senior staff stated that they will continue to monitor the quality of the children's permanence plans as they are not all of an acceptable quality. There is not currently a policy on dealing with allegations of historical abuse.

There is only limited take up of services by birth parents and birth families, and the agency must provide them with easier access to, and greater information about, its pre-adoption support service.

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency was asked to improve its matching work with children and birth parents; to improve the reports on children for whom adoption is the plan; to revise its child protection procedure; to improve its recruitment processes and to provide training for staff in permanency planning.

The matching work now undertaken is much improved, which means that wherever possible the child is matched with adopters who best meet their needs. Further improvement is required with the children's reports as they are not yet of a consistent quality. The child protection procedure has been revised and now includes a specific addendum regarding adopted children. The recruitment process has been tightened and staff have been provided with appropriate training. These steps help to keep adopted children safe and also help to ensure that their needs are paramount.

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 agency uses a matching matrix which enables staff to highlight the specific needs of each child so that all staff involved in the matching process have a clear idea of the type of adopters required. There is good knowledge about the needs and likely backgrounds of the children who will be requiring adoption in the near future, and this means that wherever possible the child is matched with adopters who best meet their needs. Where a child cannot be matched in-house with adopters who reflect their ethnic origin, cultural background, religion and language, staff are enabled to consult their fellow consortium members, and then, if necessary, look further afield.

Staff from the adoption team are linked to their colleagues in the children and families teams so that wherever it has been decided that adoption is the plan for a child the adoption link worker will work alongside their children and families colleagues so as to ensure that good adoption practice is followed. The outcome of this for the child is that they have staff who are not only familiar with them, but who are also familiar with adoption so that the process is an effective one.

The agency prioritises applications from potential adopters if they likely to meet the needs of children waiting for adoption. It has acknowledged in its pre-inspection self assessment that it needs to encourage additional applicants from black and ethnic minority sections of the community, as the current pool of adopters is not particularly diverse. The effect of this is that children from these communities are less likely to

find a suitable match within the area, and may have to remain in the care system for a longer period before a suitable match can be found from further afield. It must be said however, that the number of children from these communities currently placed for adoption is a small percentage, and the agency has been proactive in identifying that it needs to make more progress in this respect.

Prospective adopters are taken through a comprehensive assessment, preparation and approval process. The agency hold four preparation groups annually, and adopters commented that they found the groups helpful and informative, although a number stated that it would have been helpful to have been able to talk with a birth parent at that stage. The programme is set out over a number of weeks, with sufficient time in between sessions so as to allow applicants to absorb the information they have been given. The agency will only accept onto preparation courses the number of applicants that it has staff available to start an assessment at the end of the course. This inevitably means that some applicants are turned away, and asked to re-apply at a later stage. The agency does not maintain a waiting list.

In response to a recommendation in the last inspection report, the agency has surveyed potential adopters to seek their views about holding preparation courses at weekends for example. The majority view was that they should continue to be held during the week, preferably on a Monday or a Friday. The agency stated that where a couple applies for approval as adopters, their expectation is that both of them will attend the preparation course. This expectation was not met in one of the cases that were tracked as part of the inspection process as one applicant could not re-arrange their work commitments. Clearly, from the aforementioned survey, the prospect of holding the preparation groups at different times is not a popular one. The agency nevertheless accepted that there might be occasions when it may need to consider alternative options.

At present formal applications are taken after potential adopters have attended a preparation group. The agency acknowledged that this is not in keeping with national guidance. This distorts the timescales for assessments in that they appear to be shorter than in effect they would be, if the application had been taken before preparation commences. Additionally this impinges on the right of adopters to refer to the Independent Review Mechanism, should they be considered unsuitable and encouraged to withdraw during or at the end of the preparation course.

Staff aim to complete assessments within eight months, but stated that there will always be exceptions to this where for various reasons this timescale cannot be adhered to. In the examples found of this, staff had clearly documented the reasons for the delay, and the applicants were kept informed at each stage. It should be noted however that for some, the process from initial enquiry to approval at panel took over 18 months. This is considerably outside the eight month guideline.

Form F assessments were well documented, and evaluative not narrative. The quality of the assessments is monitored by the adoption team manager. From the evidence examined it is clear that not all former partners of applicants are contacted. This is contrary to good practice. All applicants and any adults living in their household are

subject to a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) disclosure. The adoption team manager does not routinely see the results of these checks. He relies on the Human Resources (HR) department to confirm that all appropriate checks have been carried out. This is done via e-mail, however some of these are ambiguous and do not confirm whether or not the disclosure is clear. No issues regarding CRB's have arisen to date however there is a risk that important information might be overlooked which could have considerable consequences for the adoption service.

The quality of the children's permanence reports varies. The panel chair, adoption team manager and agency decision maker are all of the opinion that they have improved, but accept that further work is needed. Staff have been provided with some training in this area, and the adoption team collectively expressed their willingness to assist colleagues where appropriate.

Assessments of inter-country adopters are thorough and involve appropriate and in depth exploration of cultural matters, as well as attachment and loss associated with moving to another country.

Several of the files examined did not contain a health and safety assessment, or contained one that had not been updated. The proforma used did not make reference to the danger of hanging cords, or weapons, although it did refer to firearms. These items were added to the proforma before the end of the inspection. The agency has a specific and detailed health and safety assessment for dog owners.

Approved adopters confirmed that they were given sufficient information about both the adoption process and the child(ren) they were being considered a match for. Both they and the children are placed on the Adoption Register. There are systems in place for adopters to inform the agency in the event of a child's death.

The panel is efficiently organised and effective in making appropriate recommendations after careful consideration. Panel members are clear that their primary role is to promote and safeguard the welfare of the children. Applicants are treated courteously. It is made explicit to applicants that the panel can only recommend, and that the final decision lies with the agency decision maker. Feedback from applicants was positive. They stated that the panel experience, although daunting, was a necessary part of the adoption process. They felt the sometimes intrusive questioning indicated that the process was robust and had the well being of the children at heart.

Panel members bring a collective expertise to the panel. They are provided with regular training, although it could not be evidenced that an annual training day for panel members with the adoption team was being held. The panels are held every four weeks, and are effectively administered. Minutes are detailed, accurate and informative. They contain the panel's decision, but do not clearly summarise the reasons for the conclusions that were reached. A full list of all attendees at panels is now included. This list does not make it clear who is a panel member, which makes it difficult to determine if the panels are always quorate. After raising this with the manager, amendments were made to the process, so that all future minutes should

clearly state which of the attendees are panel members.

Applicants are informed of the outcome of the panel either by phone or in person, on the same day. The agency's decision is made promptly, and the applicants informed within seven working days. The decision is conveyed in writing however a copy of this letter was not visible on all of the files inspected.

The adoption team manager has the appropriate and necessary experience and qualifications. He has a current CRB disclosure, and this is repeated every three years. The staff team are also appropriately qualified and have relevant expertise in adoption. They have access to regular training, are well managed and well supported. This enables them to ensure that they achieve the best possible outcomes for children both waiting to be adopted and who have been adopted. Staff were unanimous in their satisfaction with Medway as an employer, and in the way that they were directly managed. They also commented that the recent reorganisation into integrated teams had worked well, as it gives them the opportunity for direct, face to face work with colleagues, and enables them to draw on each others' strengths.

Recruitment is processed by the HR department. All records are electronically kept, including scans of relevant documents such as qualifications and proof of identity, and confirmation that references have been verified. All staff undergo a CRB check prior to commencing work, and these are repeated at three-yearly intervals. This was in evidence on the electronic files. The adoption team manager is responsible for exploring any gaps in employment history with applicants for posts within his team. He confirmed that this was done, however currently no written records are kept.

The agency uses the same safeguarding children policies and procedures as fellow members of the consortium. This includes a specific addendum which relates to adopted children. It does not, however, have written procedures for dealing with allegations of historical abuse which may be made by service users during the course of service provision. Staff confirmed that they receive child protection training. Overall, the evidence indicated that the agency both safeguards and promotes the welfare of people affected by adoption who use its services.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Adopters spoke very highly of the support received before and after adoption. They felt that they were well prepared and received enough information regarding the child coming to live with them. They felt that they could access a range of support aimed at maintaining children in their new families and help the placements to settle and stabilise. Available support includes a monthly surgery at the Post Adoption Centre (PAC); access to the PAC helpline as and when they need it; a free (first year) subscription to Adoption UK; an adopters support group (run by Adoption UK for the agency); a regular newsletter; access to training and a parent and toddler group (run in partnership with Sure Start). Adopters and their children can also attend annual

summer and Christmas parties. Work that is commissioned to external agencies is monitored and evaluated on a regular basis.

One excellent example of good practice is the co-operation between the fostering and adoption teams with regard to respite care. This has enabled the adoption team to easily access both urgent and planned respite care, which can help to prevent the disruption of an adoption placement.

Adopters are made aware of and understand the importance for the child to maintain a sense of their life before adoption and therefore links with their birth families and cultural heritage.

Prospective adopters value the input from the medical advisor, with whom they are able to meet to discuss any issues they may have regarding health needs of the child and how these may impact on family life. However, stakeholders also pointed out that the uptake of this service was not as high as expected. There is also a good range of specialist resources to support adopters and children, such as mental health services, education support and a variety of flexible and individualised services tailored to the presenting needs of adopters or children.

At present staff are able to respond to requests on demand, but if the number of referrals from adoption start to increase they stated they will reassess how they prioritise the work. There are no waiting lists at present for any service, but due to the small size of this team they have been unable to develop services as they would like. Management has recognised this and has created an additional social worker post in the adoption support team.

The agency has plans to enhance the variety of services already available by careful consideration of patterns emerging and by using the expertise of specialist services in the authority. For example it is planned to have a more formalised and extended service aimed at teenagers, including outreach and some intensive and therapeutic counselling, to prevent disruption in adoptive placement when children become teenagers.

The agency provides a number of information leaflets. While the children's guide is very good, some of the other leaflets are not particularly user friendly with regards to the terminology used. The children's guide gives appropriate contact details for Ofsted and also the children's rights director. This information is not contained within the complaints leaflet however.

The agency has a number of ways to ensure that the views of children are paramount, and the service is tailored to meet individual needs. This includes producing life story book and later life letters; including reports from foster carers in papers presented to panel; carrying out direct work with children both pre and post adoption; seeking the views of the children's guardians and, where appropriate, enabling the children to attend the panel. Adult service users are asked for feedback on the service they use, but this does not appear to be consistent as a number of service users who returned Ofsted questionnaires stated that they had not been

asked for their opinions, and that communication between themselves and the agency could be improved.

Two staff have been specifically appointed to adoption team to carry out direct work with children, and bridge the gap between the adoption social workers and those from the children and families team. These staff work with children during the transition period, and sometimes carry on post adoption. They contribute to life story work, and will also guide and help the children's social workers with this crucial information.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

Overall there are some excellent examples of work with birth families post adoption and birth families are very appreciative and satisfied with the support received, particularly regarding the letterbox system. This system is robust, and before any letters are sent out they are checked twice so as to ensure that the content is suitable.

Birth families were full of praise for the post adoption social worker and said that he had been 'very kind'. They referred to the social worker as 'brilliant' and gave examples of when the intervention had helped them to move on. For example: 'The meeting with adopters was really useful. Reassured, nice people helped me to move on. I now feel ok about adoption'.

Social workers fully understand the importance of life story work and are committed to produce quality pieces of work. However, life story work is not always completed on time and the quality of children's permanence records, although much improved, is still variable with not all assessments being of consistently good quality.

The uptake of support services before adoption is small and there are examples when birth parents have not been involved as much as they should have been. The agency's current approach to working with birth parents and families does not fully ensure that they are engaged in the care planning process or that they are aware of the sort of support that is available to them pre-adoption. A more proactive rather than reactive approach is necessary.

The adoption team manager is fully informed of the current level of service provision. Feedback on the service is obtained from a variety of sources including applicants at open evening; at second opinion visits, and during pre-panel visits. Regular meetings are held with the managers of the integrated teams. Additional feedback is obtained from the panel, alongside regular feedback from the adoption team itself.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Those touched by adoption are clear of what to expect from the service as there is an informative Statement of Purpose and children's guide, describing what the service does, its aims and how it wants to achieve them. This is consistent, mostly, with how the service is conducted in practice.

Priority is given to the assessment of those adopters who are most likely to meet the needs of children for whom adoption is the care plan, either in Medway or in other authorities in the consortium. Prospective adopters are informed of the types of children waiting for families. The integrated teams are well placed to maximise a child's life chances and expectations and to ensure that prompt and suitable permanency solutions are found. Adopters receive good information, assessments and preparations.

There is clear information for both domestic and intercountry adopters regarding the process, eligibility criteria and, for intercountry adoption, the fees and legal processes relating to the country being considered.

The adoption service is generally well managed at all levels with a qualified, experienced and stable management team, able to work together well and with other managers in the integrated service. This means that those needing adoption services can benefit from a wider range of expertise and of specialist resources. This is flexibly used to meet individual needs, although the pre adoption needs of birth parents requires additional input and emphasis, to ensure a greater uptake. Some improvement is also needed with regard to the quality of the child permanence records; the speed of production of life story books; and the auditing of files.

Staff feel valued, well supported and safe. They have access to regular and appropriate training. There are formal systems to monitor performance and management tracking mechanisms, with excellent liaison amongst senior managers, to ensure that all are aware of issues and can respond swiftly, if needed. Administrative staff are not supervised on a one to one basis, but do benefit from regular team meetings.

Overall, this is an agency where a lot of thought has gone into service quality, which has a commitment to an agenda of continuous improvement, which carried out honest reviews of its strengths and weaknesses and carefully sets priorities. There is a culture which wants to build on working in partnership with a range of specialist services to achieve greater team effectiveness. The service has good track record

regarding matching and placement stability. There is very good support by a well established, committed and efficient team of administrative staff. The premises are suitable for the purpose and there are appropriate arrangements made for archiving.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The agency has recognised that it needs to give better prominence to issues of culture, diversity and equality, and is taking steps to achieve this. The current panel chair brings much expertise in equality and diversity. The composition of the panel is not diverse, but again this is something that the agency is trying to redress.

While the adult population of Medway is not as diverse as the national average, the diversity of the younger population is actually higher. The Director commented that the agency has focused lot of attention in the area of diversity and equality. She wants to ensure that staff actually understand what equality and diversity is, and can apply it in their work. The majority of staff spoken with and observed appeared to understand their responsibilities in this area. Most staff both acknowledged the diversity and equality agenda and also took ownership of it.

Feedback from adopters, adopted children, birth parents and social workers through the Ofsted questionnaires was, in the main, very positive. A number of individual social workers were singled out for praise. Some less positive responses were also received. These related to a variety of issues including poor communication; difficulties in contacting staff; lack of information, including the complaints procedure; frequent changes in the children's social worker (or no children's social worker at all) and no opportunity to give feedback. Some comments were also received regarding matching and how it was process led and somewhat inflexible, with some potential adopters feeling that their credentials were not always fully considered. Although these negative comments were made, the same respondents also found at least an equal number of positive issues.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
21	ensure that the agency effectively promotes its equality and diversity agenda; that all staff are aware of their responsibilities in this area, and they receive appropriate training where necessary. (Regulation 12, Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations 2003)	20/12/2008
16	ensure that the agency has a specific policy in place for dealing	20/12/2008

	with allegations of historical abuse (Regulation 9, Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations 2003)	
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Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure that formal applications to become adopters are taken before the preparation course is commenced (NMS 4)
- enable the adoption team manager to view all CRB's relating to potential adopters and any other adults associated with them (NMS 4)
- ensure birth parents and birth families are provided with easier access to, and greater information about, pre-adoption support services (NMS 9)
- carry out regular file audits so as to ensure the files contain all necessary documentation including health and safety home assessments (NMS 27)
- arrange an annual joint training day between panel members and the adoption team (NMS11)