

Luton Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority 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

The agency undertakes, or makes arrangements for, all statutory adoption work with children and those affected by adoption. This includes the recruitment, preparation assessment and approval of domestic adopters and those who wish to adopt a child from overseas; the latter is through an arrangement with a voluntary adoption agency. Adoption support services provided internally and are also arranged through a service level agreement with an adoption support agency.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This is a service that has been judged as satisfactory due to a number of shortfalls identified in the organisation section. Children do, however, achieve positive outcomes and the service is diligent in taking an inclusive approach when considering permanency plans for children. It has placed a number of children for adoption who have diverse and complex needs.

The service has a recruitment plan to recruit prospective adopters but currently is not proactive in this area; this means that there is not as wide a range of enquirers as there could be. The preparation of prospective adopters is good and ensures that they fully understand the complex needs of children needing a placement and that they are equipped to meet these needs.

Family finding and matching children with prospective adopters is carefully undertaken and the agency recognise there had been drift for some children and has addressed this effectively.

The service provides good quality support to families so that secure and stable placements are maintained. Introductions and placements are made with care and sensitivity and this ensures that each placement is well planned.

Adult adoptees are provided with a very good service that helps them to understand their background and, where possible, re-establish contact with their birth families.

Support to birth parents has been developed but a shortfall remains in the provision of support to them early on in the process. This means that not all birth parents are as fully involved in the planning for their child as they could be. It also means that the information they provide for the child for the future can be limited.

The agency is managed satisfactorily. The approval of adopters and the decision-making processes are robust. Staff are enthusiastic about their respective roles and overall the adoption team social workers are skilled and experienced in their role.

However, adopters' assessments are variable in quality; some are too descriptive and lack analysis. There are some gaps in the placing social workers' knowledge about permanency planning for adoption. Information for children about adoption and about their own situation is not always comprehensive. These shortfalls relate to the content of their permanence reports, life story work, their adoption files and the written guide for them to support services. The arrangements for monitoring the work of the agency are not as robust as they could be because the written reports provided to the corporate parenting board are not frequent enough and the arrangements for auditing adopters' and children's case files are not sufficient. The arrangements for verifying references for panel members are not effectively carried out and means that there are shortfalls in ensuring members' suitability.

Improvements since the last inspection

Following the last inspection there were two requirements made. One related to the further development of the safeguarding procedures and this has been fully addressed to ensure the safety of children and adults using the service is promoted. The other related to ensuring that all children have adoption files set up; this has been partly addressed, files have been set up but are not being effectively maintained. This could have an impact on adoptees' knowledge and understanding about their situation.

There were also 12 recommendations made. Eight of these have been fully addressed and one is no longer applicable; this relates to the arrangements for storing files within the premises of the agency. The health and safety questionnaire for adopters' homes has been further developed, financial support is paid to adopters promptly, adopters' files are kept up to date and support services are achieving positive outcomes for adoptive families. Panel are now being updated on the progress of cases, the constitution of panel is as required and the panel operates within its remit at all times. An eighth recommendation relating to ensuring there is a counselling service for birth parents has been addressed; this gives them the chance to work through their distress at losing a child to adoption. An ninth recommendation relating to the recruitment process for agency workers could not be assessed as none have been employed. There are three outstanding recommendations relating to verifying the references provided during the recruitment process, ensuring life story work is carried out in a timely way and ensuring staff are trained and competent in this work. These have been restated in this report.

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.

Children benefit from living in safe, secure and stable placements in which they are loved and are developing well. There are appropriate policies and procedures, which staff are fully trained in and aware about, to ensure that children are protected from harm in the event of any allegations or concerns coming to light. Arrangements for ensuring adopters are suitable people to parent children are overall sound. The careful matching processes ensure that adopters and children are well matched and that adopters are aware about, and understand, the child's specific needs. Careful introductions between children and their prospective adopters ensure that the best possible beginnings to placements are made. Another agency's social worker said, 'without the Luton social worker's involvement the placement would not have gone so well.'

From when children are placed with their prospective adopters ensure that young children are kept safe. They ensure that children are enabled to develop an understanding about how to keep themselves safe, in an age appropriate way. For example, by ensuring that children play safely in the home and by ensuring substitute carers are suitable, skilled and knowledgeable about the child's specific needs.

Children grow and develop in their adoptive placements, they live in healthy, stimulating and culturally appropriate environments. They enjoy a range of age appropriate activities and toys and their adopters are attentive to ensuring they develop their confidence and self-esteem through play.

Children's diverse health needs are met to a good standard. There is especially good attention paid to meeting needs relating to illness and/or disability as well as more routine health needs such as dental checks and treatment. This ensures that positive outcomes are achieved, even when children have been disadvantaged due to neglect in their earlier lives. Adopters meet with a range of consultants and other professionals to obtain all relevant information about a child's disability or condition. They are well supported in understanding the implications of these needs on the child, and on them as a family. A placing social worker from another agency said, 'X has made excellent progress since being placed with adopters. He was a child who displayed a significant level of developmental delay; however the adopters have worked hard to provide a high level of stimulation and as a result X's level of delay has reduced.'

The agency is especially good at ensuring that adoption is considered for all children needing permanency; even those who have the most complex and demanding needs. Once a plan for adoption has been identified for a specific child, placements are made in a timely way.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

There are a range of means for supporting families. These are provided internally, via other agencies and through a service level agreement with an adoption support agency.

Children develop sound relationships with their adoptive families and others and learn appropriate behaviour. This is supported by: the well managed beginnings to placements that are well planned and supported; adopters who are well prepared in understanding issues around attachment and behaviour and support their child to develop appropriate social skills; the provision of support when issues arise. In the event of issues arising there are good links with other agencies and services that provide adoptive placements with support; these include the child and adolescent mental health service and the virtual school. The work carried out helps to develop and maintain safe, secure and stable placements and to make sure that children make good progress in all areas of their development. Where children have specific needs that require aids or adaptations there are some good financial packages provided.

Children are appropriately supported in their education by the agency and their adoptive families. Effective monitoring ensures that they receive any support required. This can include psychological assessments and support, speech therapy and the provision of lap tops for older children. Younger children are also supported by their adopters to value and engage in less formal learning opportunities; for example through attendance at pre-school.

People coming back for a service after adoption are well supported by the good quality service. The service takes a child focused approach to assessing needs to ensure that resources are appropriately directed and used to the best advantage. One adopter said of her social worker, 'I cannot speak highly enough of her, she is always available at the end of the phone and answers emails promptly.' Adopters value the well-planned and flexible support provided to them by an agency which views adoption as a life-long process; they are confident that support is readily available now and will be at any point in the future.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency works hard to establish the wishes and feeling of children, including those unable to express these verbally. For non verbal children the agency ensures that careful assessments are carried out so that their likely wishes and feelings are established and acted upon.

Children receive information about their backgrounds and birth families. However, the information gathered, as contained in child permanence reports, life story books

and later in life letters, is of a variable quality and not always provided in a timely way. A recommendation has been made in respect to these under organisation as there is a potential impact on the matching processes and the child's future overall knowledge and understanding of his or her background.

Children are supported to maintain contact with those people significant to them. Support is also available for adopters and birth parents to write contact letters; this is a positive development and benefits all parties to the contact. These arrangements help children to maintain links to their birth family and to have a sense of their heritage.

Birth parents' involvement in planning for their child is often limited. While the child's social worker makes efforts to engage them in planning, the relationships between social workers and parents are often adversarial and success is limited. This means that not all parents are enabled to take as active a role as possible in the planning for their child and information for children about their backgrounds and early life experiences is not always as full as it could be. After Adoption, an adoption support agency, has been commissioned to provide counselling and support for birth parents; this is a positive development and is clearly having a positive impact for those parents who access this more formal service. A birth parent said counselling has helped her, 'get over some things and on with my life.'

The work carried out with adopted adults is of a very good quality and very sensitively undertaken. The service commissions After Adoption to do this work and for adoptees who have traced birth family members some very positive outcomes have been achieved. One adoptee described how they now felt like a whole person and now understood their history. Another said the outcomes were, 'beyond my expectations.'

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Children's needs in relation to diversity are identified and addressed. There is a non discriminatory approach taken to the recruitment of adopters and support services are based on individual needs.

The agency has a recruitment strategy that is inclusive however, the approach to recruiting adopters is not proactive. This does not ensure that those who are most likely to meet the needs of children waiting for an adoptive placement, are assessed and approved.

Enquirers expressing an interest in adoption are provided with information and advice that enables them to develop an understanding about adoption and the process. Adopters' feedback about preparation is overall positive; they find it useful and informative.

Assessments of adopters are carried out; these are variable in quality. While clear and sound analysis of information gathered has been carried for some, others are rather too descriptive. This lack of analysis means these assessments do not clearly show why the applicants have been assessed as having the skills required to parent a child waiting for an adoptive placement.

The approval of adopters is undertaken in a robust and effective way by a panel that gives appropriate scrutiny to the work presented; the panel is chaired by a skilled and experienced chair. Regular feedback is given to panel about cases and this ensures that members are aware of the progress of cases they have made recommendations about. Adopters are invited to attend the panel and are treated with respect and sensitivity. The administration of panel is good and panel minutes are detailed and clear about the reasons for the recommendations that are made. The decision making is robust, made in a timely way and all relevant people are notified her decisions.

The work of the agency is underpinned by a Statement of Purpose and this clearly sets out the aims and objectives of the agency. Children are informed about adoption through written guides. However, the support guide does not contain all required information and is geared at the older age range of children. This means that not all children may gain a good understanding about what to expect and how they can access further support and guidance.

The managers of the agency are suitable, qualified and experienced people to manage it. The adoption team manager is highly thought of by adopters, staff and birth family members, all of whom find her approachable and supportive. Despite significant changes within the local authority to the organisation of children's teams and some of the management arrangements, the adoption team has remained relatively stable; other professionals appreciate and value the team's experience and knowledge and specialist understanding about adoption.

The staff working within the adoption team are well established members of staff all of whom have worked for the local authority for long periods of time. They are suitable people to be carrying out their respective roles. Panel members go through a formal recruitment and selection procedure. However, the agency does not verify references with the referee to determine the validity of the reference.

There is a learning and development programme that meets the needs of the adoption team and panel members. However, for children's social workers, there are shortfalls in their understanding and knowledge about permanency planning processes in adoption, report writing, and elements of life story work. This has been recognised by the agency and some support has been provided to staff to help develop their knowledge, understanding and competence in this important work.

However, shortfalls remain which means not all of the work involved in permanency through adoption is carried out in as effective way as is possible.

While overall the work of the agency is managed satisfactorily and outcomes for children are positive there are shortfalls in the monitoring of the work of the agency. The reports to the corporate parenting board are not made at a frequency that enables the board to fully scrutinise the work of the agency. The adopters' and children's files are not subject to audit to ensure the quality of the work is good and the contents of files are as required. While adopters' files are overall satisfactory in quality and content children's adoption files are not being comprehensively maintained so information needed to ensure that children have a good understanding about their situation is not always available.

The premises the agency operates from are fit for purpose and the internal arrangements for the storage of records and back-up systems are adequate to meet its needs. The archiving arrangements for storing information about a person's adoption in non local authority premises have not been assessed by the managers; they are therefore unaware as to the quality and suitability of the premises.

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 birth parents are actively encouraged to use a support worker who is independent of the child's social worker from the time adoption is identified as a plan (NMS 12.3)
- implement and monitor an effective recruitment strategy to recruit and assess prospective adopters; with specific reference to expanding the strategy to include specific recruitment activities and the evaluation of these to identify the most effective (NMS 10.1)
- ensure that the prospective adopter's report shows information ascertained from and about the adopter is analysed and the approach is objective and enquiring in every case (Children Act 2002 Statutory Guidance 42)
- ensure the children's guide to adoption support services is appropriate to the child's age and understanding and includes how they can contact the independent reviewing officer, the Children's Rights Director, Ofsted and how to secure an independent advocate (breach of Regulation 3(1) Schedule 2 and NMS 18.6)
- ensure that the record of the recruitment and suitability checks which have been carried out for staff and persons on the central list include all points in NMS 21.1 and 21.3
- ensure the training programme equips staff with the skills required to meet the

needs of children. This is with specific reference to ensuring that social workers working with children are confident and skilled in all areas of permanency planning for adoption including report writing, developing life story books and later in life letters (NMS 23.1)

- ensure that the executive side of the council receive written reports on the management and outcomes of the agency every six months and monitors the service to ensure the agency is effective (NMS 25.6 a and b)
- introduce a system to monitor the quality and adequacy of record keeping and take action when needed (NMS 27.2)
- ensure that the child's case record contains all the information and documents as listed in AAR 12 (breach of AAR 12)
- ensure that section 56 information in relation to a person's adoption is at all times kept in secure conditions and in particular that all appropriate measures are taken to prevent theft, unauthorised disclosure, damage, loss or destruction. (breach of AIR 2005 Regulation 6)