

Hartlepool Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

Unique reference number	SC055687
Inspection date	26/05/2011
Inspector	Dennis Bradley
Type of inspection	Social Care Inspection

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Date of last inspection	06/10/2008

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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

This is a local authority adoption agency that undertakes, or makes arrangements for, all matters relating to the adoption of children under current legislation. It recruits, prepares, assesses and approves adoptive parents, and places children with them. The agency supports adoptive placements, supports children and adults affected by adoption, and arranges for birth parents to be counselled and supported.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

There are satisfactory arrangements for protecting children from harm and for promoting their welfare. For example, adoption workers and children's social workers demonstrate a careful and considered approach to identifying suitable placements for children. However, the quality of child permanence reports continues to vary in terms of the information given to prospective adopters when considering a match. The agency promotes the health, education and achievement of children; it has appropriate links, and works effectively with other agencies to achieve this.

There are appropriate arrangements for preparing and supporting prospective adopters, and adopters were very positive about the preparation training they received. The agency is committed to supporting birth families and adoptive placements and works with an adoption support agency to achieve this. Children also have access to a therapeutic service that is responsive and provides expert input when needed. However, the arrangements for assessing and recording adoption support needs are not always satisfactory.

There are satisfactory arrangements for making sure the views and wishes of children are taken into account in the preparation of, for example, their child permanence reports. However, there is limited evidence to show that the agency actively seeks and acts on the views of children concerning the service they receive from the agency. Life story work is undertaken in respect of each child who has a plan of adoption. However, there are delays in life story books being completed and given to children and prospecting adopters. Life story books help children to develop emotional resilience and positive esteem as well as a knowledge and understanding of their background.

Adoption workers have a rigorous but sensitive approach to assessing and preparing prospective adopters. There are satisfactory systems in place for the recruitment and selection of staff and panel members to ensure that only suitable people are appointed and children are safeguarded. Panel members are conscientious and diligent in their analysis of reports and information that is presented to panel. However, the panel does not always get information presented to it in a timely

manner and this could lead to delays in the implementation of a child's permanence plan.

The agency is managed by staff who have the appropriate skills, qualifications and experience. The management team has reviewed the service and introduced measures to address shortfalls such as, for example, the variable quality of child permanence reports and delays in the completion of life story books. However, some of these developments are quite recent and have not yet had time to impact on outcomes for children and other service users. Also, the arrangements for the more detailed auditing, monitoring and control of the service and outcomes for children are not sufficiently robust.

There is a positive approach to equality and diversity. The adoption service works positively to demonstrate an inclusive culture by, for example, welcoming prospective adopters from a diverse range of people within the community.

Improvements since the last inspection

Following the last inspection the provider was asked to address a number of requirements and recommendations relating to: obtaining appropriate information about the health of children's birth parents; panel administration and the recruitment of people to the adoption panel; the preparation of a comprehensive child protection policy; staff training; case recording and the auditing of case files. Action has been taken to address these to improve the overall effectiveness of the service to children and others. The provider was also asked to: prepare a comprehensive Statement of Purpose and children's guide; improve the consistency and quality of child permanence reports; and provide the executive with reports on the activity of the service twice a year. These recommendations have not been met and will be repeated.

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.

There are satisfactory arrangements for protecting children from harm and promoting their safety and welfare. The adoption team works effectively with other agencies such as schools to achieve this outcome. The agency actively promotes the health of children and ensures they have appropriate access to the services they need. For example, children's assessments cover their health needs and prospective adopters are clear about what their responsibilities are in meeting these needs. Prospective adopters also have good access to the agency's medical advisor for advice and information.

Staff endeavour to make sure that children benefit from stable placements by matching them with prospective adopters who can meet their individual assessed needs. The management team has recently introduced a more structured approach to permanency planning and the matching process. For example, 'family finders' are identified earlier, and separate permanency planning meetings are now held to facilitate planning for each child and to help make sure an appropriate match is actively pursued. Regular 'family finding meetings' are held to review progress and prevent delay.

There is a thorough and careful approach to identifying suitable placements. This involves adoption workers and children's social workers working collaboratively and effectively to achieve this outcome. The quality of child permanence reports continues to vary in terms of the information they give to prospective adopters when considering a child. However, this is supplemented with information they receive from meetings with, for example, foster carers, children's social workers and the agency's medical advisor. This process helps prospective adopters who are considering the possibility of offering a permanent home to a child. One adopter said that although their child's permanence report contained more information about their siblings than them, they were satisfied overall with the information they received. They felt they were able to make a considered decision regarding a possible match. Adopters were also satisfied with the way introductions and the moves for children were planned and managed.

There was evidence that sometimes information about children who have a plan of adoption, is given to prospective adopters before their application had been considered by the adoption panel, or approved by the agency decision maker. This practice does not help ensure that there are robust arrangements for keeping information about children confidential and secure. However, a new Head of Business Unit was appointed in October 2010 and when they became aware of this practice, in December 2010, they took immediate action to ensure it ceased.

The agency recruits prospective adopters from a varied range of backgrounds and their preparation and training are non-discriminatory. One person commented that the training was 'brilliant and thought provoking'. The service prepares prospective adopters in a sensitive way that addresses the issues they are likely to encounter including those relating to diversity and difference. The agency also ensures children are prepared for adoption and this may include the provision of therapy to help children form appropriate attachments.

Appropriate arrangements are in place to provide staff with training in how they should handle allegations or suspicions of harm and abuse. There are satisfactory procedures covering child protection and there have been no allegations made about adopters or child protection investigations relating to children placed with the service during the last 12 months.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is satisfactory.

There are satisfactory arrangements for preparing and supporting prospective adopters to help children develop positive relationships and behaviour. For example, prospective adopters receive training that covers promoting attachments and the provision of a stimulating environment. The assessment process helps ensure that adopters are approved who are committed to providing children with a safe and caring home to grow up in. Adoption workers carry out regular visits to provide support and advice to prospective adopters and this may continue after an adoption order is made if needed. There is also a therapeutic service that provides a responsive, expert input when required. This may include working with children prior to their placement or once they have been placed with prospective adopters. It is good that children and families who may live some distance outside the local authority can still benefit from this service. This demonstrates the commitment of the adoption service to ensuring continuity of therapeutic support to children. Children also benefit from the good links that the agency has established with the local child and adolescent mental health service. This ensures that prompt support and guidance are available to children and adults.

Children placed in adoptive families are encouraged and supported to achieve their educational potential. Training for prospective adopters covers the promotion of children's education and achievement. Social workers have good working relationships with local education services and this helps ensure effective planning for the future educational needs of children. There is appropriate access to additional education support when needed. This includes support for children who have to move schools when they are placed with an adoptive family. There was a very good example of support provided to a child placed with prospective adopters living in another region of the country. This involved the head teacher and a teaching assistant going with the child to their new school to share information, provide advice and to work with staff to support the child's transition.

Adoption workers carry out appropriate assessments of prospective adopters' homes to make sure that children will live in a safe, warm and comfortable environment. This includes completing a health and safety assessment that covers a range of factors, in order to promote the safety of children.

The agency demonstrates a strong commitment to supporting birth parents and families as well as supporting and maintaining adoptive placements. This includes commissioning the services of, and working in partnership with, a well established adoption support service. The agency reviews these arrangements at regular intervals to make sure the needs of people who use the service are being met. There are suitable arrangements for making sure service users receive written information about the service they are to receive. However, the arrangements for assessing adoption support needs are not always fully satisfactory. For example, in one case where adoption support was being provided, there was no recorded assessment available of the need for such support. In another case, the quality of the

assessment was not satisfactory. It did not clearly identify why the assessment was undertaken or why the particular service was being provided.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

There are satisfactory arrangements for making sure the views and wishes of children are taken into account and, where possible acted upon. The agency's children's guide to adoption includes how to contact the child's guardian and an independent advocacy service should they have any concerns. However, it does not include how to contact the Children's Rights Director, Ofsted.

There were good examples of where social workers had consulted children about the plans for their future and recorded their views and wishes in their child permanence reports. It is evident that the management team is endeavouring to make sure that, where appropriate, children's social workers do this consistently.

The council has a Children in Care Council that includes separate forums for older and younger children. These forums, and more informal events such as barbecues, are used to consult children and young people about the service they receive from the council. The Junior Council and Young People's Councils were involved in the development of the Children's Guide to Adoption produced by the service. However, overall there was limited evidence available to demonstrate that the adoption agency actively seeks children's views about the service they receive from the agency and how it can be developed.

Adoption workers and children's social workers endeavour to obtain appropriate information to enable children to gain a good knowledge and understanding of their backgrounds. Managers of the agency have introduced measures to improve how this information is recorded in child permanence reports by, for example, introducing more robust monitoring of these reports. However, there has been limited time for these measures to have an impact on the quality of these reports and they continue to be variable regarding the quality of information they contain for the child in later life. For example, one report contained inappropriate information and another contained only very limited information about a significant member of a child's birth family. Another report had not been updated and consequently gave an inaccurate account of the contribution the child's birth parents had made to their life story book.

The management team has also taken action to address delays in the preparation of life story books for children, for example, by ensuring that it is clear who is responsible for coordinating this work. Again, because these developments are quite recent they have, to date, had limited impact on outcomes for children. Life story work is undertaken in respect of all children being placed for adoption. The national minimum standards state that the life story book should be given to children and prospective adopters, at the latest, by the time of the second statutory review. There is evidence that this timescale is being met. However, children's social workers said that the aim is to have the life story book ready to go with children when they are

placed with their prospective adopters. Achieving this would clearly help with the work being done in the early stages of a child's placement but, due to delays, this does not always happen. One adopter said that having the life story book would have helped 'to make inroads' with the child placed with them. But, they also said they had received a 'very good' memory box from the child's previous foster carer which was 'very helpful'.

The agency is committed to promoting and supporting constructive contact between a child and their birth family when it is beneficial to the child. For example, staff help by providing practical support such as assistance with writing letters or by arranging venues and providing transport, to enable direct contact between siblings who do not live together. The agency is also committed to working with birth parents and families and encourages, where appropriate, their involvement in planning for their children. The agency ensures birth parents have access to independent support. Adoption workers and children's social workers actively encourage birth parents to take advantage of this service so that they are helped to work through any concerns they have regarding the plans for their child. The agency tries to ensure that birth parents are kept informed of the progress of their child's adoption.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The agency has a satisfactory strategy for recruiting prospective adopters and keeps this under review. Due to the rise in the number of children for whom adoption is the plan, the agency now advertises in the local press and this has proved to be successful in increasing the number of applicants. Adoption workers and their managers demonstrate a careful and thoughtful approach towards ensuring the most suitable placements are found for children, as well as a rigorous but sensitive approach to the assessment and preparation of prospective adopters. They treat prospective adopters and people who are interested in becoming adopters fairly and with respect. This includes ensuring enquirers receive relevant information and follow-up interviews in a timely manner, as well as carrying out robust checks on all applicants who are assessed. All of the adopters who were interviewed were very positive about the preparation courses they attended.

The agency is currently updating its policies and procedures on the recruitment to, and constitution of the panel, in order to comply with current legislation and guidance. The adoption panel is well managed and has appropriate administrative support to enable it to carry out its business. It also has appropriate access to legal and medical advice. The panel provides a rigorous analysis of the information presented to it and conscientiously reaches its recommendations. Decisions are made

with the best interests of children and are usually timely. However, the panel does not always have the opportunity to consider whether a child should be placed for adoption within the recommended timescale and this could potentially lead to delays in the implementation of the child's permanence plan. Also, when this timescale has not been met the reasons are not always recorded in the minutes of the panel meeting.

The agency has a Statement of Purpose and a children's guide to adoption. The Statement of Purpose is reviewed annually and presented for ratification to the executive side of the Council. However, neither document is fully satisfactory. For example, the Statement of Purpose does not include information regarding the procedures for the recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters, and it has not been updated regarding the membership and constitution of the panel. The children's guide does not contain information on how a child can contact their independent reviewing officer, or the Children's Rights Director, if they wish to raise a concern. Also, the guide is not available in different formats to ensure it is appropriate to each child's age and understanding.

The agency is managed by staff who have the appropriate skills, qualifications and experience to deliver an efficient service. There have been improvements to the managing and monitoring of the service overall. For example, action has been taken to address shortfalls such as delays in the completion of life story books for children. There was also evidence of continuous auditing and tracking of children's plans for adoption and the recruitment of prospective adopters, in order to try to avoid unnecessary delays for children and ensure an appropriate supply of prospective adopters. However, the arrangements for the more detailed auditing, monitoring and control of the service are not sufficiently robust. For example, the quality of child permanence reports is variable, there have been delays in the panel making recommendations regarding whether a child should be placed for adoption and not all panel members receive an annual appraisal of their performance. In particular, there has been no review of the performance of the panel chair. The adoption service completes reports regarding its performance which are presented to the executive side of the Council. However, these reports are completed annually, rather than twice yearly as specified in the national minimum standards. Not receiving these reports twice yearly could affect the ability of the executive to monitor the effectiveness of the adoption service in achieving good outcomes for children and other service users.

The agency has satisfactory systems for the recruitment and selection of staff and adoption panel members, to ensure only appropriately qualified and suitable people are appointed and that children are safeguarded. Staff and panel members are provided with suitable opportunities for their training and development. There is an annual schedule of training and staff can access more specialised training to develop their skills and competences, in order to help deliver good quality outcomes for children.

The management team ensures that staff have a fair and balanced workload as well as appropriate support and supervision. The adoption workers demonstrate a clear

commitment to continuous professional development and are very enthusiastic about improving standards and outcomes for children and families. For example, they provide mentoring and training to children's social workers to enable them to gain a good understanding of adoption and keep up to date with professional, legal and practice developments.

Adoption records are in general, appropriately maintained and they are stored securely. Staff work in satisfactory conditions with effective administration support to enable them to undertake their duties.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. The agency attempts to recruit prospective adopters from a range of applicants, including same sex partnerships, single adults and minority ethnic couples. The agency is part of a consortium of adoption agencies that supports a project which helps services recruit and support potential adopters from minority ethnic backgrounds. Adoption workers make sure equality and diversity issues are appropriately addressed in the assessment and preparation of prospective adopters. The matching of children to prospective adopters is carried out carefully and sensitively and, for example, religious and cultural considerations inform the overall process. This helps to ensure that, as far as possible, children are placed with adults who can best meet their needs.

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 the adoption agency has a clear and appropriate Statement of Purpose and that this is reviewed at least annually (NMS 18.1 and 18.3)
- ensure that the adoption agency's children's guide to adoption contains appropriate information including how to contact their independent reviewing officer and the Children's Rights Director, Ofsted if they wish to raise a concern. Ensure it is appropriate to each child's age and understanding and is reviewed at least annually (NMS 18.5)
- ensure the executive side of the local authority receives written reports of the management, outcomes and financial state of the agency every six months (NMS 25.6)
- ensure that only prospective adopters who have been approved are provided with information about a child who has a plan of adoption (NMS 13.7)
- ensure that when deciding whether to provide a service, or which service to provide, the agency has regard to an appropriate assessment of the needs for adoption support services (NMS 15.2)
- ensure that the wishes, feelings and views of children are actively sought and

taken into account by the agency in monitoring and developing its service (NMS 1.6)

- ensure that the agency is active in its efforts to obtain for each child clear and appropriate information to enable them to have a knowledge and understanding of their background (NMS 2.1)
- ensure the life story book is given to the child and prospective adopters in stages, in particular to enable its use in the early stages of a child's placement (NMS 2.7)
- ensure that each panel member's performance, including the chair, is reviewed annually against agreed performance objectives (Adoption Guidance: Adoption and Children Act 2002, paragraph 39)
- ensure the adoption panel makes a considered recommendation on whether a child should be placed for adoption within six weeks of the statutory review where adoption was identified as their permanence plan (NMS 17.6)
- ensure that there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the agency and that these are implemented. (NMS 25.1)