

Milton Keynes Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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Inspector	Carole Moore / Paul Clark
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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 is constituted as a service under current legislation that requires local authorities to provide or make provision for adoption services. The agency is a member of the Adoption 6 Consortium, which comprises five other local authorities and one associate voluntary adoption agency. The consortium aims to provide easier access to the range of adoption services, to increase opportunities for matching children and adopters and identify potential adoptive parents at an early stage. The agency recruits, prepares, assesses and approves adopters, provides post adoption support and places children with adoptive families. The agency also works with adults in providing birth records counselling, offers an intermediary service, a tracing service and carries out work with birth family members wanting to contact an adoptee. The agency refers people who want to adopt a child from another country to a voluntary agency which specialises in this work. The agency also has a contracts with two adoption support agencies to provide independent support to birth parents of children for whom the plan is adoption and to offer support and training to adoptive families.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This is a good service overall, with some aspects of very good practice within the outcome areas. A significant strength is the staff team. They are committed, enthusiastic, knowledgeable and skilled, and work well together to provide a child-focused and integrated approach to placing and supporting children within their adoptive families.

Matching, introducing and placing children with suitable adopters are carried out well to ensure children's needs are well met by adopters who understand the challenges they may bring. There is a range of support to sustain placements, help children enjoy and achieve, promote their self-esteem and reach their full potential.

There is a real commitment to involving birth families in the plans for their children, obtaining information for children, supporting birth families so they understand what is happening and promoting effective contact arrangements. This is of significant benefit to children and ensures they have a real and ongoing understanding of their heritage. 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.

Areas for improvement have already been identified by the new manager and these involve improvements to quality assurance systems and ensuring serious incidents are well monitored.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last inspection required the manager to address a number of recommendations related to the efficient operation and management of the service. These have all been satisfactorily implemented to significantly improve the service provided to children and families.

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 safety and well-being of children placed for adoption is given a high priority by this service. Children are placed with adoptive families who are well prepared for the task of adoptive parenting and keeping them safe. Safeguarding, attachment and managing behaviour form a significant part of the preparation course and ongoing training, ensuring adopters have a thorough knowledge of how to promote all aspects of safety. There are also clear guidelines on social networking and contact.

The agency ensures children's physical, emotional and social development needs are promoted. Adopters promote healthy lifestyles, and access appropriate medical services for their children once they are placed with them. Prospective adopters have good access to the agency's medical adviser, and other medical personnel, so they can discuss the implications of any health needs a child may have. This ensures that they have full information, and can access the necessary resources. Clear written guidance is provided to prospective adopters on parental responsibility and medical consents. This ensures there is no delay in accessing treatment in an emergency. There is also the opportunity for prospective adopters to spend time at the Early Intervention Centre to enable them to have the opportunity to experience behaviours they may encounter from the children they adopt.

The matching process is generally thorough and prospective adopters are approved from a wide range of backgrounds. This means that the individual needs of children are very carefully thought through in order to try to ensure that they are given the best possible placement. The preparation and training of prospective adopters are non-discriminatory and one person said, 'The training is thought provoking' and another commented 'The pace is just right.' The service prepares prospective adopters in a sensitive way which addresses the issues they are likely to encounter, including those around diversity, disabilities and social differences. The majority of prospective adopters feel they are treated fairly and are an equal partner in the process of achieving good outcomes for children who need a caring stable home. Where issues are raised by prospective adopters, the service is quick to respond and

works towards a resolution in a speedy manner. All matching meetings follow a standard recording format to ensure a high degree of consistency in the way information is presented to panel. However, the service has had three disruptions and usually where this does occur, independently chaired meetings review practice which enables the service to learn from them. There was one assessment of a disruption that lacked clarity; this is currently being addressed. Prospective adopters provide the child with an appropriately child-focused book about their prospective family so they know what to expect and thus make a smoother transition to their new family. There is also a DVD produced for each child where adoption is the plan.

The adoption service has a robust safeguarding policy and procedure in place that is known to staff and prospective adopters. All staff understand the process to follow should there be any issues or concerns of a safeguarding nature. These procedures have been approved by the Local Safeguarding Children's Board and the Local Authority Designated Officer.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency has a strategic and considered approach to supporting adoptive families so that children remain in stable placements and enjoy and achieve to their full potential. Children's educational needs are well identified and supported.

Adopters experiencing problems in dealing with children's educational development or challenging behaviour, whether this is at home or in school, will be referred to the virtual school team within the council which supports children who are or were, in care. A personal education plan will be constructed identifying how children's educational needs will be met; these are appropriately reviewed at regular intervals. Families may also consult professionals in the local child and mental health services teams for help in supporting children to address their challenging behaviour. The virtual school team work closely with teachers in mainstream education to inform them about the particular educational needs of adopted children. This includes training on attachment and loss theory as it may affect adopted children. These various levels of involvement provide an excellent level of educational and behavioural support for adopted children. There is a written corporate education policy that promotes and values adopted children's education and there is also a written protocol that outlines how the authority will support the educational needs of looked after and adopted children.

The service actively plans and provides the support that children and adopters will need following an adoption placement being agreed. Adoption support social workers meet with adopters on a frequent basis at the early stage of placement to monitor how the plan is being applied and to gain an awareness of any potential difficulties that might be arising and how to deal with them. These will also be raised and dealt with at the review meetings chaired by an Independent Reviewing Officer. Adopters benefit from a good range of ongoing support services. These may include financial

support.

Children of an appropriate age are visited by placing social workers at the early stage of placement and are seen alone and asked if they are happy with their living environment. Households in which children live are well decorated and furnished with adequate space and with suitable resources for children. Adopters may be given a setting up grant to cover immediate essential items and expenses, based on adoption support needs.

Foster carers who go on to adopt children who are placed with them receive an adoption allowance based on levels of need. These levels of financial support will help to ensure that children will live in homes that provide adequate facilities and resources.

Approved adopters are given one year's free membership of a registered adoption support agency where they can access help and guidance about adoption. The service has a resource library of adoption materials which adopters are encouraged to access. Adopters can access advice and counselling from an approved counselling service that the council have a service level agreement with. Adopters have access to a range of information materials and events which inform them about national and local developments in adoption. The service circulates a quarterly information newsletter and arranges forum meetings for adopters which are both recreational and informative. There is an information page on adoption on the council's website. 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.

The service organises occasional social or leisure events for adopted children which gives them the opportunity to discuss aspects of adoption with their peers. The council have appointed a participation officer who organises a range of events and forums for looked after children and for children who have experienced care. This work involves actively consulting children about their experiences of care and feeds into service development. The officer has produced an excellent website where adopted children have access to a range of information about adoption. There are currently no forum meetings held for adopter's birth children.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children's wishes and feelings are taken into account in all aspects of their care and they know how to obtain support and make a complaint. There is a whole service commitment to listening to children and looked after and adopted children have a voice as a result of positive participation and inclusion mechanisms. Children of an appropriate age are informed about their rights and where they can go to get help. They receive useful advice about adoption and their rights as adopted children and this information is contained within a children's guide.

Children are aided in understanding their backgrounds by the provision of good

quality life story books and later life letters. This is achieved by social workers receiving training in this work, consultation with staff with expertise in this area and careful scrutiny from efficient monitoring systems. Prospective adopters are informed in their preparation training about the importance of maintaining birth family contact and the impact this will have on promoting children's awareness of their personal history.

Birth parents are consulted about their views of the proposed matching with prospective adopters. Adopters are encouraged to meet with birth parents unless this will negatively impact on the well-being of the child involved or is otherwise thought inappropriate. Birth parents are offered the opportunity to receive counselling and other support services from an approved agency with whom the adoption service has a service level agreement. This support for birth parents helps to maintain positive links between birth children and their adopted children.

Contact arrangements between birth family members and adopted children are established at an early stage of planning and agreed by the court. The adoption service has an effective letterbox system in place to facilitate written contact between birth families and their adopted children. An appointed member of staff has responsibility for coordinating the various aspects of contact between birth parents and adopted children. Birth parents generally have a high regard for this service.

Adopted adults are well supported in accessing their birth records by a specialist worker within the team. This worker will also conduct intermediary work and support contact with birth family members. One adopted person using this service commented, 'I will never be able to thank them enough for the way that they supported me in finding my birth mother.'

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency has a clear aim to provide secure and sustainable adoptive placements. There is a clear recruitment strategy in place which is regularly reviewed to ensure the agency is responding to the needs of the children waiting. Adopters are often recruited through 'word of mouth' and people coming back to adopt a second time are a testament to the service provided. The information which enquirers receive is informative, and this is complemented by a comprehensive initial visit where any queries can be answered. The preparation, assessment and approval of prospective adopters is a thorough and rigorous process, which ensures that the adopters understand the challenges of adoptive parenting, the needs of the children, and are able to meet those needs in a safe and appropriate way. Adopters commented that

the preparation was 'very thorough' and they feel 'well prepared for the task of adoptive parenting.' 'We were made to feel extremely relaxed and this enabled us to talk openly and naturally.' Prospective adopters' reports are comprehensive and analytical.

The agency holds frequent adoption panels to ensure there is no delay in progressing children's cases or approving adoptive families. These are effectively administered so that panel members have good opportunity to give all the papers full consideration. The diverse range of experiences of the panel members ensures there is an informed and balanced recommendation. The adoption panel receives regular information on the progress of children, adopters and timescales, and it has further developed formal quality assurance mechanisms to give feedback to the workers; this enables them to improve practice where necessary. The minutes are comprehensive and provide a good and accurate record of the discussion and reasons for the recommendation. This is not only important for the decision-making process but also for the child in the future. The agency decision maker makes a timely and considered decision based on full information and this is communicated to the relevant people orally and in writing. All new panel members are required to undergo induction training to ensure that they are well prepared for and able to consider the complex information that is presented at panel meetings. Each person on the central list is given the opportunity to attend joint training with the adoption team staff in order to keep abreast of relevant changes to legislation, regulations and guidance in respect of adoption services. The agency has introduced new policies and procedures and terms of reference to meet the new standards.

There is clear information for children and service users so they know what to expect from the agency. The children's guide is child-focused and suitable for children with a variety of needs. However, the manager is currently producing a guide for younger children to ensure children of all ages have the appropriate information.

Recruitment practices are robust for all members of staff and panel members. References are verbally verified and all gaps in employment history checked. The manager of the agency is new in post and is a suitable person to work with children. She is appropriately skilled, qualified, knowledgeable and experienced to deliver an efficient and effective adoption service.

A significant strength of the agency is the calibre of its staff at all levels. They are committed, enthusiastic, and hard working as well as being knowledgeable, experienced, skilled and appropriately qualified. They are well supported through regular supervision and access to relevant training to ensure they retain their competence and up-to-date knowledge of adoption issues. This ensures they deliver a child-focused service of a good quality. The effectiveness of this is reflected in comments received from service users: 'Efficient and caring service with approachable staff.' Another adopter said of their social worker: 'She has been phenomenal.'

The agency is managed effectively to deliver a good service. Everyone is clear about their roles and responsibilities and how they fit into the overall objective. There are

good links between the fieldwork teams and the adoption team to provide a child-focused and integrated service, dedicated to improving outcomes for children. The administrative support is excellent; staff are very committed and take ownership of the work, knowing their part in the adoption process is vital for the smooth running and delivery of the service.

The service is well monitored at all levels. Development plans are already in hand to update and strengthen monitoring. The executive is well informed and committed to adoption and has good oversight through regular reporting. Plans are also in hand to formally put in place six monthly reports to the executive board. Complaints are responded to in a positive way as a means to improve practice.

Records are appropriately maintained and contain the required documentation. They provide information which will assist an adopted person understand why decisions were made about their life, should they access their records in the future.

The records are kept secure in the office and archived records are safely stored in suitable conditions with robust safeguards. The premises are appropriate for the purpose; they are secure, and have rooms available for meetings and interviews.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Everyone in the agency shows respect for each other and this extends to respect for anyone using the service. All children, however complex their needs, are given the chance of an adoptive family if this is in their best interests. Their needs are comprehensively assessed and met on an individual basis, with appropriate support as required. All the documentation embraces diversity.

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 there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling any serious incidents and ensuring quality.(NMS 25.1)