

# Kirklees Metropolitan 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

This is a local authority adoption agency that undertakes, or makes arrangements for, all statutory adoption work. It is managed within children's services and undertakes case responsibility for children who are subject to a placement order.

The agency recruits, prepares and assesses adopters, matches children with families and supports all people affected by adoption, including adopted adults and birth families. Other support services are contracted where required.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This service was inspected against the revised national minimum standards. All the standards were inspected under the following outcome areas: staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and organisation.

There are good arrangements for protecting children from harm and for promoting their welfare. For example, social workers demonstrated a careful and considered approach to identifying suitable placements for children. The agency actively promotes the health, education and achievement of children and has good links, and works effectively with other agencies to achieve this.

There are good arrangements for preparing and supporting prospective adopters. Adopters were very positive about the preparation training they received. In particular, they valued the opportunity to bring people from their own support network to the last day of the training. The service is very committed to supporting birth families and adoptive placements.

The service is good at making sure the views and wishes of children are taken into account when planning for their care and future. However, there is limited evidence to show the service actively seeks the views of children concerning the service they receive. Life story work is undertaken in respect of each child who has a plan of adoption. However, it has not always been clear who was responsible for coordinating this work prior to a child's plan for adoption being confirmed within the court process. Because of this, arrangements to obtain clear and appropriate information for the child may be less effective. 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 good 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. There are good arrangements for making sure the service's two panels get information presented to them in a timely manner. This helps prevent delays in the implementation of a child's permanence plan. However, the service's decision-maker has not carried out an annual review of the performance of the chair of one of the panels.

The agency is managed by staff who have the appropriate skills, qualifications and experience. There are good arrangements for reviewing the service and introducing measures to address any shortfalls. For example, there is now a 'mini panel' that monitors and reviews children's permanence plans to keep them on track and prevent delays.

There is a very good 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**

There were no requirements or recommendations made at the last inspection of this service.

### **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.

There are good arrangements for protecting children from harm and promoting their safety and welfare. The adoption service works effectively with other agencies such as schools to achieve this outcome. The service 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. Adoption workers regularly complete strengths and difficulties questionnaires with children to highlight any concerns that may need to be referred to, for example, the child and adolescent mental health service. 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. There is a thorough and careful approach to identifying suitable placements and children's needs are central to this process. Social workers in the adoption

service work collaboratively and effectively to achieve this outcome. Prospective adopters confirmed they received good information and advice when considering the possibility of offering a permanent home to a child. One adopter said there had been 'excellent information and communication.' Adopters were also satisfied with the way introductions and the moves for children were planned and managed. They confirmed that they had been consulted throughout this process.

As with other local authorities, Kirklees has experienced an ongoing increase in the numbers of looked after children over the last five years. This has led to a significant increase in the number of children with a plan for adoption, currently 100 children compared to 33 at the time of the last inspection in 2009. This in turn significantly increased the workload of the adoption social workers not only in relation to family finding, but also the statutory work they must carry out because they have case responsibility for children who have a plan for adoption. A consequence of this was that, for a period of time the service found it could not allocate promptly the volume of work that was coming through. This in turn led to delays in placing children who have a plan of adoption and in assessing and approving prospective adopters.

The management team has already taken action to improve performance. For example, there has been a review of family finding processes and case management, and improvements have been made. These include close liaison between a link worker from the adoption team with the children's care management teams, as well as clear and tight timescales for the handover of cases between the teams, to facilitate planning for children and prevent delay. The arrangements for monitoring permanence care planning to prevent drift has also improved. For example, a 'mini' panel has been set up to review every six months each case where a child has a plan for adoption and they have not been placed with adopters. The executive of the Council also monitors the agency's performance in meeting timescales for placing children with prospective adopters.

There is a clear commitment within the service to finding the most suitable placements for children. For example, social workers are very clear that meeting each child's individual needs is the priority and they said there are no restrictions on approaching other adoption agencies in order to do this. It is good that, if there are no prospective adopters approved by Kirklees available for a match, the service makes a prompt referral to the Yorkshire Adoption Consortium and the National Adoption Register. It is also evident that the adoption workers follow up any potential links with potential adopters quickly. It is also good that the service makes use of voluntary adoption agencies to, in particular, find families for children who are difficult to place. The service also ensures children's profiles are regularly updated and, where appropriate featured in a range of national publications.

The management team has devised and is implementing a clear action plan to recruit and assess sufficient adopters in a timely way, in order to meet the needs of children. The plan includes: seconding a marketing manager from the council's corporate communication team; forming a dedicated recruitment team; developing targeted campaigns to recruit adopters based on an analysis of the needs of children with a plan of adoption; setting clear performance targets in relation to, for example,

dealing with initial enquiries; commissioning an agency to provide staff to carry out assessments of prospective adopters to prevent delay.

The agency recruits prospective adopters from a varied range of backgrounds and their preparation and training is non-discriminatory. One person commented that the training was: 'very thorough, sensitively done and very informative.' Adopters said they particularly valued the opportunity, on the last day of training, to bring two people from their own support network. The purpose of this is to help those supporting the adopters gain an understanding of the experiences and needs of children placed for adoption, and how they might be able to provide support to the family. The agency 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.

There are good arrangements in place to provide staff with training in how they should handle allegations or suspicions of harm and abuse. There are good procedures covering child protection and the notification of significant events to the appropriate authorities. There has been one allegation made about a prospective adopter during the last 12 months and this was handled appropriately. There have been no child protection investigations relating to adopted children during the last 12 months. There has also been no significant events relating to the protection of children.

### **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is good.

There are good 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.

Adoptive parents also have good access to support and training to help them understand how past experiences can shape their children's behaviour and how to manage behaviour in a nurturing and loving way. The adoption service also has a contract with an independent agency for it to refer adoptive families who are facing difficulties that require more intensive intervention. Children also benefit from the good links that the service has established with the local child and adolescent mental health service. Arrangements have been put in place to improve access to this service to ensure that prompt support and guidance is available.

There are good arrangements for making sure adoptive families support needs are assessed and support plans are implemented. The early involvement of the adoption service in permanency planning meetings helps ensure any post placement issues are highlighted and appropriate support provided at an early stage. Other ways the

service supports adoptive families include: organising and facilitating a regular 'Adopters and Tots' group, adoption support meetings, seminars and training workshops and an annual adoption celebration day.

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. The adoption service has a good working relationship with local education services and this helps ensure effective planning for the future educational needs of children. Adoption support plans address any educational needs of children and there are good arrangements for making sure that each child over the age of three also has an up-to-date personal education plan. There is good access to additional education support when needed. For example, workers from the Council's Education Support Team can provide additional support to individual children within their school. Schools can also refer children who may need more intensive intervention and support to the 'Butterfly Project', run by the Psychology and Specialist Outreach Service.

Adoption workers carry out thorough 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 service demonstrates a strong commitment to supporting birth parents and families. This includes commissioning an independent service for birth families which offers advice and counselling. The adoption service 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 birth families receive written information about the services that are available.

## **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

There are, overall, good arrangements for making sure the views and wishes of children are taken into account and, where possible acted upon. For example, the service's children's guide to adoption includes how to contact an independent advocacy service should they have any concerns. 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. The service ensures children's views are central to permanency planning meetings and the matching process.

Kirklees has an active Children in Care Council and this forum is used to consult children and young people about the service they receive from the Council. It is evident children and young people have an impact on service delivery and development. For example, they have been involved in reviewing the children and adolescent mental health service. However, there is limited evidence available to demonstrate that the adoption service actively seeks children's views about the



service it provides to them and how it can be developed.

Life story work is undertaken in respect of all children being placed for adoption. It is evident that adoption workers and foster carers endeavour to obtain appropriate information to enable children to gain a good knowledge and understanding of their backgrounds. Adoption workers who hold case responsibility for children are clear about their responsibility for coordinating this work, once a case is transferred to them from the care management team. However, social workers in the care management teams were less clear about their responsibility for coordinating life story work prior to a child's case being transferred to the adoption team. This could lead to important information not being obtained from, for example, children's birth families and delays in providing children and their adopters with life story books. Social workers in the care management teams also said they had not had any training in life story work. Adoption workers are providing briefings about life story work to address this issue and social workers in the care management teams who have attended these said they were now much clearer about their responsibilities in relation to this work. The service aims to provide children and their adopters with a 'mini' life story book early on in the placement and provide a more comprehensive book prior to the adoption ceremony. There is a strong commitment within the service to improve both the timeliness and quality of life story work and this includes providing training to social workers.

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, where appropriate, prospective adopters are actively encouraged to meet with birth parents before a child is placed. Staff also help by providing practical support such as assistance with writing letters and there is a good letterbox system in place. 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. Where possible the agency also keeps birth parents informed of the progress of their child's adoption.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

Not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The agency has a clear strategy for recruiting prospective adopters and keeps this under review. Adoption workers and their managers demonstrated 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 clear written information about the process and the needs of children who require an adoptive family. People said that Kirklees is very welcoming and they confirmed that their preparation training prepared them for the realities of adoption. One adoptive parent said: 'All the staff have been friendly and supportive, especially a concern as we are a same sex couple, we have been impressed.' Another said the preparation training was 'excellent'. All prospective adopters have to attend the four day initial adopter preparation training, which is currently held three times a year. Kirklees also collaborates with other adoption agencies in the Yorkshire Adoption Consortium to deliver preparation training in Asian languages for Asian applicants who are not fluent in English.

Adoption workers ensure robust checks are carried out on all people who apply to be prospective adopters to ensure they are suitable and safe to care for children. They also complete thorough, analytical assessments of prospective adopters to make sure they have the competencies and capacities needed to meet the challenges of the adoption task. It is good that all of the adoption workers who undertake assessments have received specialist training in how to assess the attachment styles of prospective adopters. Team managers read all the assessment reports. If they identify any issues or concerns they arrange for a second social worker to carry out a follow up visit to address and resolve these.

The service has two adoption panels and both meet monthly. They are both properly constituted with a diverse membership drawn from a central list. They are well managed and have very good administrative support to enable them to carry out their business. Adoptive parents said they were made to feel welcome by the panel. The panels have good access to legal and medical advice. Each panel provides a rigorous analysis of the information presented to it and conscientiously reaches its decisions and recommendations. Decisions are made with the best interests of children and are timely. There are good arrangements for ensuring birth parents receive written confirmation of the decision-maker's decision. However, records were not always available confirming that a social worker had contacted the birth parents beforehand to tell them of the decision.

The service has a statement of purpose that provides a clear and concise outline of what services it provides and how outcomes for children are to be achieved. There is also a children's guide to adoption which is given in conjunction with leaflets about how to complain and how to access an independent advocate.

Overall the agency has good systems for the recruitment and selection of staff and adoption panel members. These ensure only appropriately qualified and suitable people are appointed and that children are safeguarded.

The day-to-day management of the service is sound. There are satisfactory arrangements for monitoring the quality and adequacy of records, such as the case records of children and prospective adopters. The management team have reviewed

the service's business systems to ensure, for example, that there are clear timescales for each responsibility. Arrangements have also been introduced to improve the monitoring of permanence plans to prevent drift and promote good outcomes for the children.

Staff are provided with good opportunities for their training and development. There is an annual schedule of in house training and staff can access more specialised training to develop their skills and competences, in order to help deliver good quality outcomes for children. However, the training records for panel members do not demonstrate that they have access to appropriate training, such as induction training for new members of the central list. There was evidence that, apart from one of the panel chairs, the performance of panel members is reviewed annually to ensure they remain suitable to sit on the panels.

The management team ensures that staff have a fair and balanced workload as well as appropriate support and supervision. The adoption workers demonstrated a clear commitment to continuous professional development and are very enthusiastic about improving standards and outcomes for children and families. For example, they provide briefing sessions and support social workers in the care management teams to enable them to gain a good understanding of adoption. However, there are not sufficient adoption workers in post to enable the service to recruit and assess sufficient adopters to meet the needs of the increasing numbers of children with a plan for adoption. In order to increase the numbers of adopters available the service is commissioning an agency to provide staff who will carry out the assessments of prospective adopters to minimise delay.

Staff work in satisfactory conditions with effective administrative support to enable them to undertake their duties. There are good arrangements to ensure that adoption records are stored securely and protect confidentiality.

The promotion of equality and diversity is very good. The agency endeavours to recruit prospective adopters from a range of applicants, including same sex partnerships, single adults and minority ethnic couples. Adoption workers make sure equality and diversity issues are appropriately addressed in the assessment and preparation of prospective adopters. There is a clear emphasis placed on children understanding their identity and place within their family of heritage. 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 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 the service is active in its efforts to obtain clear and appropriate information from birth parents and birth families. Ensure that appropriate arrangements are in place for the preparation of a child's life story book to be coordinated by one person, preferably the child's social worker (NMS 2.1 and 2.5)
- ensure birth parents are informed orally of the decision-maker's decision within two working days and that a suitable record is kept confirming this (NMS 17.12)
- ensure the agency's decision-maker reviews the performance of each panel chair annually against agreed performance objectives (Adoption Statutory Guidance paragraph 35)
- ensure the adoption service implements an effective strategy to recruit and assess prospective adopters who can meet most of the needs of those children for whom adoption is the plan - in particular, ensure the service has sufficient staff to implement the strategy. (NMS 10.1)