

Kingston upon Hull City Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

Unique reference number	SC056542
Inspection date	08/11/2012
Inspector	Marian Denny / Valerie Shephard
Type of inspection	Full

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Date of last inspection	27/04/2009

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Kingston upon Hull City Council is a local authority adoption service which undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with adoption. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters. The service works closely with children's social workers within the authority to ensure that children are matched with suitable adoptive families. Currently the agency places children with its own approved adopters and those approved by other agencies. The council commissions a service for those wishing to adopt from overseas from a voluntary adoption agency.

The agency provides support for adoption placements. It also provides post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption. Support is provided to birth families both by the service itself and through a contract with an adoption support agency. This agency also provides birth records counselling and intermediary work.

The agency approved 26 adoptive families and placed 46 for adoption in the year preceding this inspection. At the time of the inspection there were 17 children currently waiting for an adoptive placement. However, three of these children had been linked to adopters.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

Good: a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

Adequate: a service that only meets minimum requirements

Inadequate: a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **good**.

This is a good adoption service. Both the managerial and staff teams are child focused and work hard to ensure good outcomes are achieved for children placed for adoption. The service provides thorough preparation training. It also has a robust assessment, approval and decision-making process in place, which ensures adopters are suitable and able to undertake their parenting role. Children are placed in stable, secure homes, which meet their assessed needs. Consequently, children make good progress in all areas of their development, including their ability to attach and form positive relationships with their adoptive family.

The local authority is working hard for looked after children to achieve permanence through adoption. There are good tracking and monitoring systems to ensure this is always considered. Consequently, the number of children placed for adoption is 6% which is above both their statistical neighbour group and the national rate. It is good at placing siblings together, and has managed to do this quickly in some cases, taking into account the ages and needs of the children.

The service works well with its partner agencies to provide children with appropriate and effective adoptive families. Stakeholders and adopters were positive and expressed satisfaction about the quality of the service provided. During 2010-2011, the volume of adopters' applications had an impact on the timeliness of assessments; however, this has now been resolved.

Adopters are well supported so that families stay together and placements do not disrupt. The disruption rate is low, with two placements disrupting in the last two years. This represents approximately a 2% disruption rate in children who have been adopted over the past two years. This compares very favourably with the national rate which is over 10%. The service provided to adult service users is sensitively delivered and of good quality.

Safeguarding is very much at the forefront of its practice, which ensures children are safe in their adoptive families.

Leaders and managers demonstrate a strong commitment to adoption. Staff are extremely hard working, qualified, skilled, knowledgeable and committed to delivering a good quality service. They are supported by good communication, effective supervision and access to appropriate training.

Life work and the production of life story books are not of a consistently high standard, nor are they always produced in a timely manner. There is also some variability in the quality of children's written assessments.

Service user and stakeholder feedback influences the development of the practices of the branch; however, feedback from adopted children is not routinely sought.

Areas for 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 taken into account in monitoring and developing the service (NMS 1.6)
- ensure the life story book is given to the child and prospective adopters in stages: at the latest by the second review of the child's placement with the prospective adopters (NMS 2.7)

- ensure the management of the agency makes sure all staff's work and activity is consistent with adoption regulations and national minimum standards and with the service's policies and procedures, with specific reference to a consistently high standard of life story books and child permanence report. (NMS 25.3)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **good**.

The majority of children who have an adoption plan are placed within 12 months of an adoption decision being made. This ensures children do not wait too long before being placed with an adoptive family. However, in situations, where this is not achieved it is usually due to court delays or the complexity of a child's needs, which makes it more difficult to find families in the required timescale.

Children's wishes and feelings regarding their adoption are obtained, though this is not always as effectively ascertained in relation to younger children. However, children are generally well prepared for adoption and understand what is happening to them. Adopters' understanding of the importance of contact and effective promotion and support of these contact arrangements, ensure children understand their backgrounds, heritage and identity.

Children enjoy safe, stable and secure lives with their adoptive families, as demonstrated by the low disruption rates of adoption placements. Their needs, including those relating to ability, gender and ethnicity, are assessed and appropriate support is put in place to meet those needs, for example, training in attachment issues.

Children make good progress in all aspects of their development, for example, their health, educational attainment, behaviour and social skills. They are supported to develop appropriate and strong attachments to their adoptive parents. This results in children growing, putting on weight and making good physical progress because they are more emotionally secure. This is clearly demonstrated by the comment: 'The child's health has greatly improved and as a result he has not had a day off school in one and half years.' Other stakeholders commented on the improvement in a child's emotional health and the excellent support given regarding children's attachment needs, stating: 'The child now makes eye contact and asks for hugs.'

Children do well at nursery and at school. For example, there are improvements in children's speech, their manipulative skills, their reading and mathematical ability. This is because of the support and encouragement their adoptive parents give them. This is clearly demonstrated by the comments made by teaching staff, for example, one teacher said that the child had made good educational progress and was now attaining the same educational levels as their peers. He attributed this progress to the adoptive parents and stated: 'Credit to the adoptive parents as they have worked hard to ensure the child has made good educational progress.' Another stated: 'The progress this child has made in the last two years is remarkable; the child has

flourished in all areas of care. I feel this is a real testament to the adoptive parents.'

Children's behaviour improves as a result of living with their adoptive parents and through the support and advice the service provides to their families. This enables children to access community resources more successfully, as well as form more positive relationships both within and outside the family. Consequently, children access a variety of community leisure activities such as swimming, ice-skating, horse riding, rugby, football, martial arts, playing instruments and being in the Guides and Scouts. They also have opportunities to meet with other adopted children through the annual social event. However, some adopted children stated that they would like an increase in these social events.

Access to leisure activities and adopted children and young people's social events enables children to become more socially confident. It also enables them to develop a strong sense of their own self-worth, identity, as well as aspirations for their future. For example, one young person wanted to become a politician and another wanted to be a nurse. Clearly, the quality of care provided by the children's adoptive parents is good. This ensures children's needs are effectively met and their life chances are improved.

Quality of service

The quality of the service is **good**.

The local authority receives a large number of adoption enquiries. Enquirers receive comprehensive verbal and written information promptly. Adoption staff visit all those continuing to express an interest in adoption in order that further discussion can take place regarding adoption. This ensures that enquirers are very quickly able to make an informed decision about whether they wish to pursue their interest in adoption.

A number of adopters were impressed by the way the service handled this process and were extremely positive about it. This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by an adopter's comment: 'Social workers didn't have preconceptions about us and our lifestyles, but looked beyond that and looked at us as a family and what we could offer.'

A comprehensive and thorough preparation course, which runs four times a year, ensures prospective adopters are well prepared for the task of being an adoptive parent. Placing social workers commented positively on the preparation training and assessment process and confirmed that adopters are very well prepared for their role as adoptive parents. They stated that this, together with effective matching, contributes to successful and stable adoptive placements.

Adopters also confirmed this, stating that the preparation and assessment process had been 'absolutely fantastic', 'brilliant', and, 'it has really helped us understand the challenges involved in parenting a child, who has been in care'. It had also helped them understand the benefits to a child in knowing about their birth families and adoption from an early age. They stated that they greatly valued the birth family

information and the mementos and photographs that foster carers had provided. However, life story work and books are not always of a consistently high standard and provided in a timely way. This prevents them being used with the child early in placement to assist the child in their understanding of their life history and reasons for adoption.

Some adopters' views on contact had also changed during this process, as they had recognised its importance in maintaining a child's heritage and developing their identity. Consequently, contact is being well promoted, with adopters prepared and committed to ensuring contact with birth families takes place, where this is in the child's best interests. Adopters and children are also well prepared regarding safe contact. For example, the agency has done a great deal of work regarding social networking and how to manage this safely. Direct contact with siblings, where this is in children's best interests, is also very well supported.

During 2010-2011, the considerable number of prospective adopters' applications resulted in some applications taking longer than eight months to complete. However, this has been addressed and current applications are completed within timescales. Despite this, adopters expressed a high level of satisfaction with the approval process.

Assessments are robust and analytical and give an accurate picture of the family and the resource they offer to children. Information about a child's needs also enables the service to make a considered decision about whether the prospective adopters have the required strengths to meet these needs. This effectively contributes to a successful matching process.

The service does its utmost to ensure prospective adopters receive full information about a child. There are well prepared and organised meetings between birth parents and adopters. This ensures adopters are able to obtain first hand, qualitative information about their child's family history, life experiences, as well as gaining a real understanding of their child's birth parents.

Adopters are also able to meet with other professionals, such as the adoption panel's medical adviser to discuss any specific medical needs of the child, whom they may be considering adopting. This enables adopters to make an informed judgement about whether they can meet a child's needs and provide a home for them. Placing social workers commented about how well supported adopters were during the matching and introduction process, which they believed formed a sound basis for a successful adoptive placement.

The adoption panel is robust in its consideration of applications to adopt and this further supports safe and secure placements. Panel members contribute differing experiences, both personal and professional; this ensures a full and balanced discussion of differing views takes place. A feedback on the quality of reports at each panel meeting is provided, along with information regarding the timeliness of assessments and the reason for any delay recorded. A quality assurance feedback on the quality of the reports being presented to panel is also provided to the agency

every six months. The decision-making process is robust, well considered and timely, which ensures only appropriate adoptive parents are approved.

Staff are extremely committed and work hard to provide a quality service to meet the needs of adoptive families. The service provides a variety of support services, which includes a regular adopters' support group. At this group, training, such as understanding attachment issues, trauma, managing challenging behaviour, and medical conditions, is provided. This training is invaluable, as it enables adopters to understand the impact of this on the development, well-being and behaviour of their child. It also supports adopters to understand the task of adoptive parenting and to become effective parents.

There is also a regular coffee morning and a summer outing. Attendance at these activities helps to ensure that families continue to be supported both formally and informally. These groups also provide an opportunity for friendships to develop between the adults and the children attending. This provides a good opportunity for supportive relationships to develop between people who are in similar situations.

In situations where there is a need for therapeutic support, this can be provided through the child and adolescent mental health service or purchased from an external agency, if this is more appropriate. This ensures adoptive families receive the therapeutic input that they require and helps the adoptive family to remain together.

Since the last inspection, the service has developed a post adoption team. They are able to respond promptly to adoptive families' requests for adoption support. All adoption support post placement is provided on an individual basis, as there is a clear process for dealing with adoption support referrals. This includes a written assessment of need, together with details of the service provided. The service is regularly reviewed and a feedback obtained, enabling the outcome and impact of this support service to be fully evaluated.

The local authority has also funded a full-time clinical psychologist, who is able to offer a consultancy service to staff where children have complex needs or attachment difficulties. He also offers support to staff in preparing children for adoption and providing advice regarding the matching of a child with adopters. This support is invaluable and greatly contributes to the success and long-term stability of the adoptive placement.

There is a letterbox system in place for maintaining contact between adopted children and their birth families. Support to write letters is provided to birth parents, birth relatives and adopters, if requested. This system is well organised and managed and effectively promotes contact between all parties.

The service, in conjunction, with an adoption support agency, provides good support to people whose lives have been touched by adoption. The adoption support agency provides independent support and counselling to birth parents and their relatives. Birth records counselling and intermediary work are also provided. These services are

of good quality, sensitively delivered and well managed. A written agreement supports the work commissioned from the adoption support agency. There are monitoring arrangements in place to ensure the service is cost effective and meeting the needs of those using its services.

Adopters and stakeholders were extremely satisfied with the service. This is clearly demonstrated by some adopters' comments: 'Staff are very professional, knowledgeable and supportive'; 'Staff will always go the extra mile'; and 'I have not required any support from the authority, but I have every confidence that should support be required, it will be provided'. Stakeholders also commented on 'the good working relationships' that exist between them and the adoption staff.

Safeguarding children and young people

The service is **good** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

There are good arrangements in place to protect children from harm and promote their safety and well-being. The agency ensures that anyone who works with children is safe to do so, through robust recruitment and selection practices. Prospective adopters who are considered unsuitable to adopt are counselled out an early stage.

The preparation training ensures prospective adopters understand how children's previous experiences, including abusive ones, impact on their behaviour. This work is extremely important as it increases their understanding of the individual needs of any child placed with them. It also ensures that adopters have a good understanding of the long-term impact of any previous abuse that their child has experienced and the specific safeguarding issues that may be applicable to their child. The agency also ensures through their support packages that the adopters are able to manage this effectively.

Assessments of adopters are robust and this ensures their suitability and ability to care for children. Children are well matched with adopters and placements are well supported. Adopters and children receive support and advice on safety matters. For example, adopters are supported to adopt safe caring practices, and where necessary, risk assessments are put in place to protect children. Work is also undertaken with members of adopters' support networks to help them understand adoption and increase their ability to support the adoptive placement. Training is provided on the use of the internet and the dangers that can arise from social networking and other social media. The service also works effectively with other professionals, for example, schools, which promotes children's safety.

Children have various written information, which is produced in a child-friendly format and gives them details of a variety of people they can talk to if they have any worries or concerns. They receive regular visits from their own social worker and the adoption social worker, who, although there to support the adoptive parents, also has a clear focus on the child's welfare and safety. This ensures there are adults who are accessible and to whom they can talk.

Staff are proactive in addressing potential safeguarding issues at an early stage. They recognise and address any concerns which may develop into a more serious issue by providing support and they work closely with the child's social worker. Safeguarding is very much at the forefront of their practice and any issues of concern are discussed in supervision. Staff practice is also developed through discussions in team meetings and learning from serious case reviews. This emphasis and commitment to safeguarding ensures staff are up to date with current issues and know how to respond if there are concerns or allegations.

Good safeguarding policies are in place, which are effectively followed and this ensures children are well protected. Since the last inspection, one safeguarding matter has arisen. This related to an allegation of historical abuse and was effectively addressed in accordance with safeguarding procedures. This ensured that other children and young people have been effectively safeguarded.

Good work is carried out with adults affected by adoption. Considerable care and thought are given to birth records counselling and it is provided in a sensitive manner. Adoptees and other adults using the service are supported to understand the potential impact a reunion may have on them, their family and the birth relative being contacted. This ensures that the work is carried out sensitively, with particular regard being given to the safety, welfare and wishes of all involved.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the local authority adoption agency are **good**.

Recruitment of adopters is good. It is well planned and reflects local, regional and national trends. The chief officer and the senior management team demonstrate a strong commitment to adoption. Considerable work has been done to ensure it is always appropriately considered as one of a range of options for permanency. The co-location of staff in a shared building, the development of the I-LAC team and the positioning of adoption champions in the remaining locality teams have also assisted this process. As a result, children are being identified at an early stage for adoption and good decision-making processes ensure they are being placed in a timely way. An adoption plan is in place for all children, where it is appropriate. Over the last three years the local authority has increased the numbers of looked after children who have been adopted from 21% to 25%. This is a high percentage in comparison with their statistical neighbour group. The local authority clearly has aspirations to increase the yearly proportion of children adopted from care and staff are working hard to achieve this.

Robust recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters, together with the qualitative nature of the matching process, ensure children benefit from a stable home. This is clearly reflected in the service's low disruption rates, which are below the national average.

The Statement of Purpose and children's guide give comprehensive and clear information to anyone using the service so they know what to expect. The children's

guide is very child-friendly, gives good information and is available in alternative formats so that children of different abilities can also access the information.

The service enjoys good, effective relationships with its partner agencies, including other local authorities in the adoption consortium. These effective working relationships benefit children waiting to be adopted, as it often results in an adoptive placement being found for them. It also ensures that should families experience any difficulties, effective support can be quickly provided.

There are a number of quality assurance processes to improve outcomes for children. For example, leaders and managers monitor their performance and reports are produced to inform the executive side of the local authority. Corporate parenting is developing and arrangements have been made for a report regarding the activities of the adoption service to be presented to the scrutiny and overview committee.

Systems are in place for the on-going auditing and monitoring of the service. However, these are not sufficiently robust, as not all records are accurate; for example, several of the child permanence reports had errors, and in two cases the date of birth was incorrect. In another the birth mother's views were inserted in the section relating to the birth father. The panel subsequently identified these errors and they were addressed, however, more robust quality assurance processes should have detected these earlier.

The service seeks feedback from adopters and stakeholders. Feedback from adopted children though is not routinely obtained. The service is intending to obtain such feedback in the future and this will be used to inform future adoption practice.

The service is managed by skilled, experienced and well-qualified managers who show a strong commitment to improvement. Adoption staff are also suitably qualified, skilled and the majority very experienced in this work. Both the managers and staff are committed to providing a good quality service to ensure children have the best chances in their lives.

Social workers are extremely positive about the support they receive, which includes good quality supervision and training opportunities. Staff place a real emphasis on their professional development and use team meetings as a forum to discuss any learning arising from disruptions, complaints, allegations, case studies and research. This ensures the competency of staff and enables them to provide a good quality, safe and effective service. Good administrative support is in place and workers are knowledgeable, professional and efficient. This enhances the effectiveness of the adoption service.

The premises are accessible and secure. They are appropriate for the purpose and have rooms available for meetings, training, and staff supervision. Records are stored with appropriate security and accessibility, both electronically and in hard copy. There is a business continuity plan, which addresses the safeguarding and back-up of records, as well as the provision of alternative premises. This ensures that in the event of a crisis, disruption to the service is minimised.

Three requirements and 13 recommendations were made following the previous inspection of the service. These have been appropriately addressed to improve the service and provide more positive outcomes for children. For example, there has been an increase in the recruitment of adopters to meet the needs of children with an adoption plan.

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 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for local authority adoption agencies.