

# Newcastle City Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	14/05/2009

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

This is a local authority agency which undertakes all statutory responsibilities relating to adoption. These duties include: placing children who have adoption as a care plan with suitable adoptive families; recruiting, preparing, assessing and approving adoptive families, including those who wish to adopt from overseas; providing support to adoptive families and providing a service to adopted people in relation to access to records and birth records counselling. Birth parents and family members are offered counselling and support by the agency, or through arrangements with a local voluntary adoption agency.

The agency approved 45 families in the year ending 31st March 2013. In the same year 48 children were placed. 11 children were currently waiting for an adoptive placement.

### 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**.

The agency is effective in securing safe and stable adoptive placements for most children in a timely way. The majority of children placed are very young, but where possible, they are involved in their plans. Direct work with them ensures they understand what is happening. Examples were given where life story work was revisited, or additional information gained from their parents, in response to their needs at an older age.

Careful matching ensures that few placements disrupt. A range of support is provided to adoptive families, sometimes in consultation with other services and professionals. This ensures that the needs of children are met without delay and that their protection is assured. Outcomes for children are good and they make progress in all areas of their lives. Their opinions are recorded through the Viewpoint system, which is part of a wider strategy to improve recording of children's views in planning.

The lifelong implications of adoption are well understood across the local authority

and are largely reflected in practice. Leaders and managers have an accurate understanding of the strengths of the service, and take effective steps to improve where necessary. For example, it has re-organised its social worker services and increased the capacity and changed the structure of the adoption team. The improvement agenda is well understood by the experienced and skilled staff group, who work creatively, in the best interests of children under the effective leadership of the managers.

## 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 that the manager regularly monitors all records to ensure compliance with the agency's policies (and specifically to ensure consistently high quality of CPR's)(NMS 25.2)
- ensure that staff understand and follow the agency's policy for managing confidential information. (NMS 27.2)

### Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **good**.

A very large majority of children with an action plan wait no longer than 12 months from the time of the decision to placement for adoption. Although there have been delays at early stages, once young people have an adoption plan, they gain from effective family finding. Appropriate placements are therefore identified in a timely manner. They are helped to settle with their new families through well planned introductions, which review their reactions and progress. They live in safe and secure adoptive families, and very few experience disruptions. Where this has happened, the young people concerned have been helped to understand why they had to move, and have been successfully placed with other families.

Children are well prepared and older ones are helped to understand what is happening. All children have life story books for use when they are of an age to understand their past. In addition foster carers keep photographs and memory boxes for them, and contact workers obtain photographs and information where possible. Where life appreciation days are held, anecdotal information is captured, and attendees record their comments in a book for the child.

Children make good progress in all aspects of their development. Where necessary they receive appropriate support to help them progress in their emotional and social development, health and learning. Adopters, independent reviewing officers (IRO's) and social workers commented positively on their progress. Robust matching ensures that they live with adults who can meet their needs. Siblings are placed together

where this is in their best interests. Their individual needs and sibling assessments inform the decisions. Later born children join their brothers or sisters where this is appropriate, for all concerned.

A strong commitment to contact benefits children and their birth families. The service manages letterbox contact and some direct sibling arrangements, to help children keep the link with their families. Some children have gained information provided by birth families at a later stage, following their request for further information.

Where children and their families need support after adoption, this is provided in a timely manner, and is effective. They gain from prompt and thorough assessment of their needs and well planned interventions. Where appropriate they have access to specialised services to meet their needs.

### **Quality of service**

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

A thorough approach to preparing, assessing and approving adopters is effective in providing families for the authority's children. Prospective adopters are highly positive about their contact with the authority, from initial enquiry onwards and say that they feel welcomed. They value the training and particularly the sessions with experienced adopters and birth families. Hearing the birth parents' stories has made them more open to meeting with them, continuing contact arrangements and talking to their children about their past. This, therefore, is positive for their children's understanding of their background and adoption.

Assessments are carried out in a timely way. The service is addressing the quality of assessment reports to ensure more evaluation; however, they do consistently contain sufficient information for panel to make recommendations. Panel exercise thorough oversight and scrutiny and reasons for their recommendations are clearly recorded for the child's information later in life. A range of people on panel bring relevant experience and skill, and a strong focus on the needs of children. The agency decision maker (ADM) provides effective scrutiny and considered decision making. She values access to legal and medical advice, where necessary.

Child permanence reports contain sufficient information for panel and ADM to consider, and for adoptive parents to consider at the matching stage. However, parent's views are not consistently recorded, and the quality is variable. A minority contain information about other people, that it would not be appropriate for the child to read in later life. Positively, they now contain a full assessment of the child's support needs. Life story work is prioritised, and workers in the contact service have been trained and have a good understanding of the importance of gaining information at early stages. They record relevant information for the benefit of children.

Family finding is rigorous and the adoption team and area teams work together to identify possible matches at an early stage, to reduce delay for the child. Records of

matching meetings demonstrate that children gain from all their needs being taken into consideration. Adoption social workers know the children well and ensure that prospective adopters have full information, to make considered and informed decisions. Adopters said they have sufficient information in order to care for the children and meet their needs. The medical advisor provides full written information which outlines the potential impacts of children's care and experiences on their later development. She contacts other medical specialists who have been involved with the child, where necessary. Where appropriate, adopters meet with her to discuss individual needs.

The service considers the support needs of families at the matching stage, and responds promptly to requests for assistance before and after adoption orders are granted. The service is aware that children would gain further from more effective working together with other agencies and services. Where children are unlikely to attach readily, adopters have access to specialised training (which is to be extended to all adopters). Post adoption support requests are dealt with effectively. Detailed and comprehensive assessments of need inform planned work, which is carried out in a timely manner. Other agencies and professionals work with children or their families where necessary.

Effective and sympathetic involvement with birth families is evident. The area teams and the adoption team work together to engage birth parents, and other family members, in a variety of ways. This has a positive impact on their adopted children, as they have provided information for them later in life. This work has been augmented by the establishment of a dedicated birth family worker post in the adoption team. Positive contact arrangements, are established and maintained through the letter box system. Information is provided to birth families about the availability of independent support. Some birth parents have been supported to speak with adopters at preparation groups, and they expressed their confidence and trust in workers in the adoption team.

### **Safeguarding children and young people**

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

Children are safe and their welfare is promoted by regular visits from a social worker, up to the time of the adoption order. Where children and young people receive post adoption support, their welfare is at the centre of any planning and actions. The recruitment of staff, panel members and prospective adopters is thorough and suitability checks serve to protect children. There have been no allegations or suspicions of harm.

Children live with families whose assessment and preparation includes consideration of physical safety. Prospective adopters are well prepared to understand the potential impact of abuse on children generally. In addition, at the matching stage children's experiences are fully explored, and consideration given to the potential adopters abilities to understand and meet the individual child's needs. Examples were given where the medical advisor had also spoken with adopters about the

lifelong implications of harm or abuse.

Matching and contact planning consider the risks to children's welfare. Contact agreements outline whether or not photographs and gifts can be exchanged. Prospective adopters are recruited from outside the area to provide children with additional safety where necessary.

## **Leadership and management**

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

Overall the adoption service is effective in identifying and placing children who may benefit from adoption, in a timely manner. The proportion of looked after children is in line with comparable local authorities.

A large majority of children who should be adopted are identified at early stages, however, where this is not the case, they are placed with adopters in a timely manner, due to the effectiveness of family finding and matching processes.

Recruitment of prospective adopters is effective, in meeting the needs of children looked after within the authority. The service has been active in recruiting a wider range of adopters, through targeting specific groups in the community, with some success. Information provided to enquirers is clear, welcoming and honest about the needs of children looked after in the authority. The information and preparation stage, helps enquirers make a decision about whether to pursue adoption. Assessments balance the needs of the authority's children with the preferences and skills of the potential adopters. Timeliness of approval is good, and workers book in panel dates at an early stage, and progress is well monitored.

There is a high commitment to adoption throughout the local authority. Leaders and managers are effective in achieving their goals for a range of children, including large sibling groups, those who have been subject to severe neglect and babies who suffer from effects of their birth mother's alcohol or drug use. Robust case tracking and management information systems ensure that plans are well monitored and delays minimised. An independent reviewing officer with specific responsibilities for adoption, has been appointed to ensure that individual plans do not drift.

The wider service plan and adoption service business plan are reviewed regularly against challenging local targets. Managers supply information about the service and progress of improvement to members, partners and senior managers within the authority. The commitment to the improvement agenda is understood and embraced by the members of the adoption team and the wider service.

The adoption service has had a recent increase in staffing and management support, and is well resourced. Staff are experienced, skilled and knowledgeable and work in partnership with children's social workers, and other professionals to the benefit of children. They say they are well supervised and value the training opportunities which improve outcomes for children. They say their managers are approachable and available to them and that they are extremely well supported.

Appropriate records are maintained, which largely contribute to an understanding of the child's life. The service has plans to improve the quality of some of the documents, as mentioned earlier in this report. In addition, some inappropriate information about siblings have been included in CPR's and there has been breaches of confidentiality when sending for prospective adopter references.



## **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 the inspection of local authority adoption agencies.