

Sheffield City 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

Sheffield City Council adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with adoption. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters and matching of children. The service provides, or makes arrangements for, the support of everyone affected by adoption, including birth families and adopted adults.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This announced full inspection assessed all national minimum standards. This is a good service with some excellent practice. There is a well-developed understanding and a balanced approach to implementing equality and diversity. The adoption service has a high profile within the council and partnership working is well developed. The council's looked after children strategy also encompasses children who have been adopted and is known as the 'looked after and adopted children strategy'. The service has clear plans, both at strategic and operational levels, to improve outcomes for children and some of these are well developed and are having a positive impact. Others are at earlier stages of planning or implementation and their effectiveness has yet to be evaluated. Outcomes for children are good and they receive individualised care and support which reflects their needs well. Effective management systems are in place throughout children's services to resolve any difficulties or delays in providing services, in a timely way. The service is effectively and efficiently managed and staff are competent and committed to achieving positive outcomes for children. Practice is reflective and takes into account changes in legislation, good practice guidance and up-to-date research.

Improvements since the last inspection

The one action made at the last inspection has been acted upon and panels do not offer advice to the agency outside that permitted by the regulations. Three recommendations were made at the last inspection and these have been addressed. Health and safety checklists are now wider ranging and new information packs for adopters and children's guides have been developed.

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 adoption service is focussed on the welfare of children and ensures they are safe and protected from significant harm. All the required checks and references are taken up for people who have contact with children, and adoptive applicants' referees are interviewed in detail. Social workers are clear about their supervisory role when visiting families. Children feel safe and understand how to protect themselves when using the internet and social networking sites. The service works effectively with other professionals to promote children's safety.

Children's physical, emotional and psychological health is well promoted and they can access services to meet their needs, both before and after the adoption order is in place. In addition to services available to all children in Sheffield, specialist services are available to promote healthy attachments and address issues specific to adoption. Health assessments undertaken by medical advisors summarise the experience of the child, social factors and medical information with a focus on prognosis for the future. These inform panel discussions and matching. Prospective adopters meet with medical advisers at life appreciation days and in individual sessions, which ensures they are fully informed about a child's needs. Children benefit from stable placements and are matched and placed with prospective adopters who can meet most, if not all, of their assessed needs. The service is robust in its family finding for children in order to minimise delays and children are referred to outside agencies at early stages. Some children are placed very quickly and the service has plans in place to enhance family finding activity, in conjunction with the children's social work teams. Where family finding has taken longer, the service is aware of the reasons why, and has action plans in place to address this.

Care is taken to ensure that prospective adopters have full information to inform their decision making, and this is enhanced by life appreciation days which are held to gather and share information. Adopters confirm that they have full and clear information prior to a child being placed. Planning meetings are being developed further to formalise the placement process and to ensure that children have as smooth a transition as possible. Children and adopters are well prepared for the moves, and where adopters have their own children their needs are considered. Foster carers are largely experienced in moving children on to adoption and use books and photographs provided by adopters so that children recognise them on their first meeting. Introductions are adapted to individual needs and include effective monitoring of the child's reactions and progress. Good levels of communication and support benefit the children involved. The service has low levels of disruption and where this does occur, independently chaired meetings review practice which enables the service to learn from them.

Effective arrangements are in place, via a contract with a local agency, to ensure that children are appropriately matched and placed in inter-country adoption. These arrangements are well monitored.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Prospective adopters are prepared and supported to help children develop positive relationships and behave appropriately. Preparation training includes sessions on promoting attachments and behaviour management and these areas are also well explored during assessments. Adopters understand that children's previous experiences can manifest in challenging behaviour and the support and advice from adoption workers is described as 'fantastic' and 'very helpful'. Social workers in the team are trained in 'theraplay' and where there are significant concerns there is a multi-agency psychological support team to offer telephone or face-to-face consultations. In addition adopters can access the support of their local children's centre through universal services and attend parenting groups. The service is increasing support available early in placement to ensure adoptive parents respond and manage children's behaviour in positive ways.

Promotion of pre-school learning, education and achievement is evident and adopters have access to the council's education support team and virtual head to ensure that children have extra support in school to meet their needs where necessary. Where appropriate specialist nursery assessments take place and adopters receive information about local playgroups and centres where children can socialise. Young people have received help in leaving education and finding apprenticeships and college placements. They are involved in a range of leisure activities and like having holidays. Children live with adopters whose homes provide adequate space to a suitable standard and adoption workers and children's social workers carry out monitoring visits.

Post-adoption support is provided by a specific team within the adoption service, the family, adopters and carers team (FACT), who provide a responsive, individualised and wide ranging service. Information is available on the website, in leaflets and through annual fun days and Christmas parties which allow adopters and adopted children to meet with others. The FACT team offers a range of support groups to children who say it is 'nice to make friends with other children who are also adopted' and 'we support each other'. The groups are adapted in accordance with feedback from children and their parents. Families requesting post-adoption support receive assessments of need which result in appropriate services being provided by the team directly or by referral to other services. Children's needs are being met throughout their lives, for example, life story work is being revisited with older children.

Support to birth parents is provided by a local agency with whom a contract is in place and the quality of service is monitored through regular meetings with the adoption service manager. The agency provides both individual counselling and a birth parent support group which is well attended. Birth families are informed of the services available to them.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

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. Their social workers, foster carers and adopters advocate on their behalf to ensure they receive the services they need and independent reviewing officers encourage them to express their views and engage in their reviews. The corporate parenting manager consults widely to develop services, for example, a revised advocacy services is being commissioned and young people are currently involved in the tendering and selection process to ensure it is tailored to their needs.

Children are supported to have a positive self-view, emotional resilience and knowledge and understanding of their background. From discussions with adopters it is evident that the preparation and assessment process is effective in helping them to understand the value of providing an environment where children know about their past and their adoption. The quality of child permanence reports (CPRs) remains variable despite the panel exercising a robust role in ensuring that full and clear information is included in appropriate language for the child later in life. The adoption team have identified this as an area for development and several initiatives are in place to improve them, in conjunction with social work teams and senior managers. The adoption team is working to raise awareness in social work teams both formally and informally to ensure that information, photographs and mementos are captured and retained or recorded. Life story books are not always provided at an early enough stage for them to be used positively with the child early in placement. Independent reviewing officers are active in requesting them in reviews and monitoring that they have been provided, however delays persist.

The adoption service promotes ongoing contact where this is beneficial to children. Adopters are well prepared and committed to promoting contact with birth families sensitively. Birth families are consulted and involved in drawing up post-adoption contact agreements. A dedicated worker manages and monitors the letterbox arrangements and provides support to adopters and birth families in writing the letters. Where siblings are in separate adoptive placements, the adopters are encouraged to make the arrangements themselves to allow the children to meet in a more relaxed and flexible way.

Birth parents and families are encouraged to take an active part in planning and social workers attempt to gain their views on the plans and the content of CPR's with varying degrees of success. They also ensure that birth parents are aware of the services available to them, at the time of the adoption and for the future. Adopted adults and birth relatives are assisted to obtain information in relation to their adoption. The FACT team provides an access to birth records service, including a counselling service for adult adoptees and provides information to them, including

how to access intermediary services locally. Young adopted adults whose birth family member wishes to make contact are advised of their rights.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. There is a clear policy statement that the adoption service welcomes and actively considers prospective adopters regardless of religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation or disability, and marketing material uses a range of images to reflect diverse households and avoid stereotypes. Translators can be provided or written information produced in other formats and languages. Adoption workers liaise with colleagues through a local consortium to explore adoption issues, and an Asian adoption preparation group is available to Sheffield families, should they wish to attend. Children are at the centre of holistic and integrated services which are provided to meet individual needs, in a flexible way through effective multi-agency working.

The service has a recruitment strategy which is open, rather than targeted to meet the needs of children for whom the plan is, or is likely to be, adoption. The service manager is aware of the trends and good communication with the fostering and social work teams ensures she is kept up to date. Enquirers receive positive and timely responses and processes are clear to them from an early stage. Adopters were positive about their experiences of the information evenings and preparation groups, and particularly welcomed the opportunities to talk with experienced adopters. They understand the need for checks and references to be taken up and are considered in terms of their abilities to look after children in a safe way that meets children's developmental needs. Assessment agreements are in place so that expectations are clear to applicants at the start of the process and visits are planned ahead. Prospective Adopters Reports are comprehensive and strong on the exploration of their childhood experiences of being parented and their motivation. They are analytical and contain good summaries.

Adoption panels and the agency decision makers (ADMs) make timely and well considered decisions in line with the overriding objective to promote the welfare of children throughout their lives. The quality assurance role of panel is well defined and systems are in place to feedback general and specific concerns to the ADM and relevant managers via the panel advisors. Three panels meet each month and there is facility to convene extra panels to prevent delay for children. The efficiency of the administration of panel ensures members have information and time to read reports beforehand. Minutes are clear and outline specific reasons for recommendations. The chairs of panels are experienced in adoption and members have a range of

experience and skills which they bring to open and robust discussions. Prospective adopters are invited to attend and said that they were put at ease as far as is possible, and appreciated the chair coming out to meet them then to tell them of the outcome.

The adoption services has a clear Statement of Purpose which outlines its objectives. The children's guide is excellent. It is interactive and appropriate for young children including those who cannot yet read. It can be adapted to suit the needs of an individual child and is very well produced. The children's guide to adoption support provides them with the information they need.

The agency is managed by people who have appropriate experience, skills and qualifications and who are committed to ensuring that outcomes for children are continually improving. The adoption workers and team managers have a wealth of relevant experience between them, and have opportunities to increase their knowledge and skills through training and continuous professional development. All adoption staff are well supervised and supported and value the service manager's inclusive style and leadership qualities. Business support staff are integral to the adoption team and provide a flexible and valued service. Relationships with the children's social work teams are developing and the adoption team provide them with advice and assistance. Consultant posts have recently been established to provide mentoring for newly qualified workers and those who are new to adoption work. Careful selection of staff and persons on the panel central list serve to protect children.

Procedures and practices for monitoring and controlling the activities of the adoption services have been strengthened and there is a strong improvement agenda across children's services. The adoption managers are aware of barriers to improving outcomes for children and have started to address them. They work in conjunction with other teams and services outside of their direct control, but which impact on children placed for adoption. For example, concerns about the negative and lasting effects on children of some contact arrangements are being discussed with the courts. The executive side of the local authority take their responsibilities as corporate parents seriously, monitor the service to satisfy themselves that the service is effective, and an elected member sits on each adoption panel. Written reports are not provided at six monthly intervals.

Due to the variation in quality of CPRs, records are not always accurate nor do they always contribute to an understanding of a child's life. The service has made progress in this respect and are looking to improve them further. The premises allow for safe storage of confidential information and provide adequate facilities.

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 that life story books are provided by the second statutory review of the child's placement with prospective adopters (NMS 2.7)
- implement an effective strategy to recruit prospective adopters who can meet most of the needs of those children for whom adoption is the plan (NMS 10.1)
- ensure that the executive side of the local authority receive written reports on the management and outcomes of the agency every six months (NMS 25.6)
- ensure that entries in records are accurate, non-stigmatising and distinguish between fact, opinion and third party information. (NMS 27.4)