

Middlesbrough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Sean White / Sue Winson
Type of inspection	Key

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Registered manager	Jane Wilson
Responsible individual	Jan Douglas
Date of last inspection	24/11/2006

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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. The agency recruits, prepares, assesses and approves adoptive parents; it also matches and places children with adoptive families. It also provides, or makes arrangements with an independent agency, for support services for both adults and children affected by adoption.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced key inspection, undertaken by two inspectors over three days.

This agency promotes the wellbeing of children placed for adoption through a concerted, thorough and careful approach to the assessment of families and considered matching of children with them. This is undertaken by very experienced managers and staff who exercise their responsibilities with skill and judgement, aided by a rigorous approach to scrutiny by the adoption panel. There is a very good approach to issues of diversity in the service's operations.

Support services to families, birth parents and others affected by adoption are well established and consistent. There is a clear commitment to ensuring all participants in the adoption arena are fully supported and accepted as equal players without prejudice. Children's histories and circumstances, however, are not recorded or produced consistently and in a timely way.

Within the resources available it is a well-managed agency, at all levels, including the executive. Systems and administration are efficient, workers are well supported and encouraged and there is a clear operational infrastructure. There are, however, staffing issues which are impacting negatively on the capacity to undertake all responsibilities in a timely way, and this will increase in coming months.

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency takes seriously the inspection process and all the recommendations raised following the last inspection have been addressed. The introduction of new structures and systems have provided a more robust operational and administrative framework. More stability in the management structure in recent times has enabled the service to establish a more efficient operational and strategic direction.

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.

This is an agency that concentrates its efforts and focus on meeting the varied and often complex needs of children placed for adoption. It achieves this through a considered and thorough approach to the recruitment of people who are most able to provide safe and secure homes for children, and who demonstrate abilities and motivation to care for children from a range of backgrounds. The screening, preparation and assessments of prospective adopters is undertaken with an analytical rigour that ensures only the most suitable families are approved. There is a clear understanding of the importance of placing children in families that are best equipped to meet their needs and efforts are clearly aimed at securing the best possible match. This is very evident when consideration is being given to placing children with complex histories, including those situations where heritage is a central issue.

The matching process is very well managed with prospective adopters being fully informed about the backgrounds, circumstances and needs of children they are asked to consider. Although there is, from time to time, some inconsistency in the quality of children's information, robust quality assurance ensures that all necessary and relevant details are provided.

This thoughtful and thorough approach is continued throughout the whole process, including the adoption panel and decision-making. The panel, which is appropriately constituted, well attended and managed to a consistently high standard, provides close scrutiny to the work it has to consider. Well presented minutes enable decisions to be made in receipt of all necessary information and there is a conscientious approach throughout the process that demonstrates a collective commitment to meeting children's needs. The management and administrative arrangements ensure that all business is conducted efficiently and in a timely way.

Managers and workers responsible for the service demonstrate their suitability and competence to a high standard. There is significant experience and understanding of children's social care and adoption, and all workers demonstrate contemporary knowledge and insight into this area of work. The systems for recruiting workers, while generally robust when external candidates are employed, are somewhat more relaxed in respect of internal staff changing roles or being promoted.

The agency has a strong approach to ensuring that children are safeguarded; its activities and undertakings are thorough and aimed at meeting the needs of children from complex backgrounds. Matters that are not as strong are the health and safety

checklist, which does not include dangers from curtain/blind cords and the safeguarding procedures, which do not make specific reference to children in adoptive placements.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency's approach to supporting approved adopters is very committed. When placements are made adopters feel there are considerable efforts made by workers to provide an enabling and supportive structure within which they can establish their new families and make informed choices about their futures. The agency works closely with colleagues across children's services to provide a consistent, supportive approach that ensures consistency and cooperation.

All necessary specialist advice is available to the service. The medical and legal advisors are regular panel attendees and are accessible to the agency and social workers. Other specialist facilities are accessed as required and there is a service level agreement with an independent adoption support agency that provides a range of services.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency has a positive approach to working with birth parents and encourages them to be involved in the plans for their child's adoption. They are asked to contribute their views to the child's permanence report and these are acted upon if they are appropriate for the child's needs. The service has a positive approach to, and is active in, supporting contact arrangements between adopted children and their birth families.

Birth parents are offered independent support through an adoption support agency and there is regular monitoring of this service to ensure positive outcomes and value for money.

Although very committed to, and in many ways demonstrably active in, maintaining children's backgrounds and heritage, the service is somewhat inconsistent in producing high quality results in this area. There were some very good examples of life-story work being produced, using innovative means and practices and undertaken in a timely way. In other cases, however, there was some delay in creating life-story work and some lack of expertise. It is clear that capacity issues in respect of staff resources contributes significantly to this shortfall and that there is little prospect of improvement without increased input.

Children's permanence reports are similarly inconsistent, with some written in a way that does not recognise that graphic descriptions of children's pre-adoption experiences are less suitable than more considered narratives. Although there have

been improvements in recent times there remain some workers who have not had sufficient training in this area.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency is informed and directed from a well presented statement of purpose that is in line with policies and procedures; these provide a realistic framework for the service's operations. It provides prospective adopters with sufficient information for them to make an informed choice about their application and has systems in place to prioritise those who can offer children with complex circumstances a permanent home. The children's guide, however, is rather limited in scope and presentation.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Children from diverse backgrounds are carefully matched with families that reflect their heritage, and people with disabilities are welcomed and supported to be adoptive parents.

The management of the agency is undertaken by skilled and experienced professionals who demonstrate a deep understanding of meeting children's needs through adoption. There is a committed executive that is kept informed of the agency's activities and a senior management that ensures adoption is an integral part of the wider children's services.

Arrangements for managing cases and workload are efficient within the resources available and core business is undertaken with a clear understanding of outcomes and timescales. Workers are supported in their activities and enabled to undertake their responsibilities to the best of their abilities. Supervision is well recorded, demonstrating a close overview of cases with consistent monitoring of progress and outcomes.

Agency workers are very skilled and knowledgeable and undertake their duties conscientiously and with commitment, often going the 'extra mile' to ensure that work is completed satisfactorily. There are, however, resource issues that are impacting on the agency's capacity to manage workload. Although there are moves afoot to re-align some aspects of the service to increase capacity and efficiency, at present the staffing resources are barely sufficient to cope with existing demands and insufficient to manage a projected increase in workload. An imminent reduction in staffing resources (in real terms) will exacerbate this further.

The agency is efficiently administered, although staffing resources are stretched, and

there is a clear understanding of maintaining a well organised system to provide a foundation and infrastructure within which the service can perform. All aspects of security, confidentiality and environment are suitably managed and the premises are fit for purpose.

Case files are well ordered, contain all required information and are monitored satisfactorily.

Personnel files, however, are less well maintained and although all key information is kept, some information and detail is lacking; misfiling being found. Panel members' records, nevertheless, are satisfactorily maintained.

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):

- include, in health and safety checklist, reference to curtain/blind cords (NMS 4)
- provide clearer recruitment processes for internal candidates who move posts or are promoted (NMS 15 & 19)
- include, in safeguarding procedures, reference to children in adoptive placements and those receiving adoption support (NMS 32).
- produce life story work in a timely way (NMS 8)
- produce more consistent life histories in children's permanence reports (NMS 8)
- produce a children's guide suitable for all children (NMS 1)
- employ sufficient staff (NMS 21)
- ensure all information is provided in staff files. (NMS 28).