

Stoke on Trent 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

Stoke-on-Trent Council undertakes all the statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters; the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters; the support of adoption placements; post adoption support to adopters and their children. The service also undertakes step parent adoptions. In addition it provides post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, which includes birth records counselling and intermediary work, as well as support to birth parents of children placed for adoption or who have been adopted.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This is a good agency. It works effectively to provide individually focussed work that provides good outcomes for children and adults affected by adoption.

The agency recruits, prepares and assesses adopters to meet the needs of children requiring adoptive families. All applicants are welcomed in a non discriminatory manner and are assessed in terms of their abilities to parent children and keep them safe. The preparation and assessment of adopters is effective in helping them to accept the uncertainties in adoption and understand the benefits for children of openness about their adoption and contact. Adopters are positive about preparation training, their assessment and the approval process. The service works extremely successfully with the local consortium to increase the availability of adopters and will readily use inter-agency placements. Matching is a strength of the agency. Matches are made very carefully and the service works well to reduce delay for children despite some children's significant needs. A high percentage of children are placed within 12 months of the decision for adoption.

Children's health and educational needs are clearly identified. Both the agency and adopters work to meet these needs. However, cross boundary arrangements are not sufficiently developed to meet the educational needs of those children outside of the local authority.

Children receive good support to help them settle into their new families. Support needs are well understood and good assessments are undertaken. The agency works hard to ensure families are appropriately supported. A range of staff ensure a variety of supportive services are available and they work effectively together to support placements and improve outcomes. This support combined with the agency's careful preparation of adopters and good matching, ensures children experience well managed transitions into adoptive placements. This promotes good levels of

placement stability.

The adoption agency provides independent support to birth families and to seek their views about their children's adoption. These are taken into account where possible. Work is also carried out with birth parents and their families to obtain further information about themselves and the child's life before adoption. Materials for life story work and books are now being obtained at an early stage. Work to help children understand and come to terms with their background and heritage has improved. However, child permanence reports, (CPRs), life story books and later life letters are not always of a consistently high quality or provided in a timely manner. This prevents them being used with all children early in placement. It also means all adult adoptees do not always access full and accurate information in later life. Contact with birth families, where this is desirable, is well promoted and facilitated. The agency is effective in planning contact and ensures children's safety and well-being.

Adults affected by adoption receive an assessment of their needs with work based on this assessment. The agency ensures good, skilled and sensitive work is carried out and this ensures those using the service have a positive experience.

Managers and staff are experienced, skilled and are committed to improving outcomes for children. Recording, tracking and monitoring systems have been improved. However, the agency recognises further work in this area is required. Decision making in the authority is effective and the service generally well managed.

Improvements since the last inspection

Since the last inspection all the actions and recommendations made have been fully acted upon. The agency establishes a case record for a child when the adoption agency is considering adoption for a child. Agency decisions regarding proposed matches are now made and placed on the child's case records, prior to the introduction of a child to prospective adopters. The service ensures all those working for the agency are suitable and records all checks, as specified in the Adoption agency regulations.

Prospective adopters' applications are taken before applicants commence on the preparation course. All appropriate checks, personal references and enquiries are undertaken in respect of prospective adopters in a timely way to prevent delay. A comprehensive health and safety check is now undertaken. Applicants are given clear information regarding preparation training. There is a clear strategy in place for working with and supporting prospective adopters with written information regarding this provided. Birth parents have consistent access to a support worker independent of the child's social worker. All adoption records are now kept in lockable cabinets.

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 agency focuses on children's welfare to ensure that they are safe and protected from harm. Adopters' assessments are robust, with all necessary checks and references taken up for people who have contact with children. This ensures that adopters are suitable people who are able to care for children.

Placements are well matched and supported. Adopters and children receive support and advice on safety matters. For example, training and support is provided regarding online safety, with a proactive approach being taken to encourage awareness of safe social networking. The adoption team also works very effectively with other professionals to promote children's safety. For example, the looked after children's psychologist has undertaken work with older children in anger management.

The agency's safeguarding policies and practice is good and supports children to be kept safe and protected from harm. Since the last inspection there have been no allegations or suspicions of harm, nor has there been any incidents requiring notification to the appropriate authorities.

Children's physical and emotional health is promoted and monitored. Children are encouraged to participate in a range of activities to promote their physical and emotional health, for example, pre-school activities, as well as running and swimming. Children have access to universal health services and specialist health support, if required, both before and after the adoption order.

The panel focuses on children's health and the medical advisor highlights any relevant issues. Adopters have a meeting with the paediatrician prior to matching to ensure that they understand and can meet the child's needs. Following this meeting they receive a written report and each child has a health action plan. Adopters value the opportunity to meet with the agency's medical adviser prior to placement.

Adopters receive good information regarding the complexity of needs of the child that they are considering adopting. Both the adoption staff and the adoption team's psychologist focus on psychological health and attachments. Examples were seen

where such ongoing support has continued after the adoption order.

Matching of children with adopters is timely and rigorous. Children whose plan may be adoption are identified through formal and informal channels. This ensures that the adoption team can start to consider family finding at early stages to avoid or minimise delay. Regular family finding progress meetings take place to ensure there is no drift. A senior manager and legal adviser from the authority also regularly attend the court user forums, which effectively address any court delays.

Family finding is robust which includes referring children to the local adoption consortium, the adoption register and various publications. Financial agreement is also gained, where necessary, to access external placements and minimise delay. These effective working arrangements mean that most children are placed within twelve months of the decision that they should be adopted. Thorough matching meetings are held to consider children's needs. The reasons why matches are proposed are clearly documented. This ensures there is a clear picture of decision making for adult adoptees reading them in later life.

Transition plans to introduce children to their new families are well considered, with children and adopters effectively prepared and supported throughout this process. The majority of adopters reported positive introductions with the needs of the child being at the centre. Children benefit from stable placements. Rates of placement breakdown are extremely low. This demonstrates the agency's effectiveness in good planning, matching and support provided to adoptive families.

The adoption placement plan provides adopters with clear information regarding their responsibilities, the decisions they can make and where consent for medical treatment needs to be obtained. Clarity regarding their role ensures they can effectively meet the child's needs. Children's wishes and feelings, including those of very young children are sought and taken into account, as appropriate to their age and understanding.

Inter-country adopters are referred to an agency which specialises in this work.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is satisfactory.

Prospective adopters are prepared and supported to help children develop positive relationships and behave appropriately. In addition to preparation training, they have access to workshops on attachment and behaviour. Where appropriate, they also have access to a range of professionals to help them promote attachments, as well as understand and manage behaviours. This enables adopters to understand that children's past experiences can be reflected in their behaviour.

Pre-school learning, education and achievement is promoted. Children are attending playgroups, nurseries and schools. They also enjoy leisure activities and opportunities to develop their social skills. The adoption team has produced literature

for schools on the needs of adopted children to help them understand and manage their behaviour. This supports schools to improve educational outcomes for adopted children. The local authority's virtual school also ensures children in the area benefit from the provision of educational support, where this is required. However, cross boundary arrangements to meet the educational needs of those children outside of the local authority are not sufficiently developed. For example, children have not always received the additional educational support they required in school.

Children live with prospective adopters whose homes provide adequate space and health and safety assessments ensure that their environment is safe. Issues around confidentiality and privacy of information are covered in adoption training.

The service provides an adoption support duty system, which operates on a daily basis. This enables adopters to quickly access advice and assistance from the service. Support needs of children and their families are individually assessed and are clearly focussed on providing positive outcomes for each individual child and family.

There are support groups for adopters, including a bi-monthly coffee morning, which can include guest speakers who speak on a range of adoption matters. The service also provides a variety of training to help adopters manage behaviour and promote positive attachments with their children. Two social events are also provided each year enabling children who are separated from their siblings to have additional contact with each other. It also provides children an opportunity to see that other children are also adopted. The majority of adopters were satisfied with the support provided and would have no hesitation in approaching the team at a later date should they require assistance.

The service provides good support to people whose lives have been touched by adoption. Birth records counselling and intermediary work are well managed. The service also provides support to birth parents of children placed for adoption or who have been adopted. This particular aspect of their work is fully addressed in the positive contribution section of this report.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

The children's guides to adoption are accessible, colourful and give information about access to advocates. Children and young people can make their views known, through the Children in Care Council. The views of children are sought when social workers are compiling CPRs and the adoption panel has been active in promoting this.

The service also carefully listens to foster carers' views, taking into account the fact that these are the people who may know the children best. For example, where an adoption plan is being considered for a child, foster carers attend panel in order to provide first hand information regarding the child. This ensures all those present obtain a real picture of the child and greatly assists in determining what is in the

child's best interests, as well as enhancing the matching process.

Children are supported to have a positive self-view, emotional resilience, knowledge and understanding of their background. The preparation and assessment of adopters is effective in that they understand the importance for a child of knowing about their birth families and their adoption from an early age. They value information, photographs and mementos which the children bring with them from their foster carers.

Workers in the children's services demonstrate a commitment to information gathering and have recently begun obtaining this information at an early stage. However, whilst improvements in life story work and books have taken place, they are still not of a consistently high standard or always provided in a timely way. This prevents them being used with the child early in placement. Similarly, whilst there has been some improvements in the quality of CPR's, with some reports being well written and containing good information about children's backgrounds and birth families; others are of a poorer quality, in so far as they sometimes lack or contain incorrect information. The adoption service has started to address these issues through panel monitoring and training workshops. However, CPR's are not of a sufficiently high and consistent standard.

Contact is well promoted and adopters are prepared and committed to promoting contact with birth families sensitively and in the interests of children. Where possible they meet with parents or other family members. Post box arrangements are in place and support is provided to adopters and to birth family members in writing the letters. Contact agreements are reviewed and up to date. Direct contact with siblings and birth family members is well supported where this is in a child's best interests.

Birth parents are encouraged to take an active part in planning and social workers strive to gain their views and wishes, with varying degrees of success. Examples were seen where birth parents had prepared albums or written letters to their children with support from workers. The take up of opportunities for counselling by birth parents is low and has been identified as an area for development by the service. Links with other teams in the local authority have been made to ensure that birth parents are aware of the services available to them.

Good work is carried out with adults affected by adoption. Considerable care and thought is 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.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The adoption service places an individual value on all people it deals with who are affected by adoption. Children of all ages are placed for adoption as are those with significant needs. The agency works hard to recruit a range of adopters to meet the diverse needs of children requiring families, for example, single adults and those from same sex partnerships. If the agency is unable to match children with their own adopters, it works proactively with other adoption agencies to find appropriate families. Assessments consider applicants' ability to care for children in a non-discriminatory manner and to promote equality and diversity. Matches are made carefully taking into account information about the backgrounds of both parties. Individualised support is provided to adopted children to help them attach to their families. This support helps ensure that adoption meets children's needs and increases their opportunities in life.

The adoption agency has a clear Statement of Purpose which accurately describes the service and its operation. This is underpinned by appropriate policies and procedures which guide practice. It has two children's guides to adoption, one suited to older and one to younger children. These are colourful and child friendly guides that help children understand the adoption process.

The recruitment of prospective adopters is based on a good understanding of the needs of children who require adoptive families. It regularly monitors and evaluates its recruitment strategy. Good quality information packs are sent out to potential applicants and they are invited to information open days. The frequency of the information sessions ensures that people do not wait undue lengths of time. The preparation training programme is extensive and includes the opportunity to meet with experienced adopters. Prospective adopters are thoroughly and sensitively assessed in terms of their abilities to care for children. The assessment process ensures that approved adopters are well prepared to care for children. Assessment reports are of generally analytical, based on clear evidence and of good quality. There is a strong focus on applicant's abilities to parent children effectively.

Adopters commented positively on the initial response from the service and the information meeting which they found enlightening. They stated that the preparation groups were useful, informative and that assessments were carried out in a sensitive and thorough manner. Adopters said that they were kept informed throughout the adoption process and reasons for any delays were explained to them.

The adoption panel and the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) make well considered and timely recommendations and decisions, with children clearly at the centre of this process. The reasons for recommendations are clearly outlined in the minutes. The chairperson, panel advisor and panel members have a range of appropriate skills and knowledge. The quality assurance role of panel is well developed and there are systems in place for the panel to feedback general and specific concerns. When they

do so they receive a speedy and effective response. Training with the social work teams is valued by panel members. The administration of panel is efficient which ensures that members receive the papers with time to read them thoroughly. Prospective adopters attend panels and efforts are made to put them at ease.

The service is managed by staff with appropriate experience, skills and qualifications and lines of accountability are clear. Recruitment arrangements for staff and members of panel are generally sound. Staff and panel members' files are in good order and demonstrate an appropriate recruitment process. These recruitment practices ensure that children are safe. Children and service users receive a service from staff, panel members and decision makers who are competent to meet their needs.

There is a strong commitment to continuous professional development and staff are positive about the range and quality of training available to them. They receive ongoing supervision, support and annual appraisals, which identify training needs.

The council takes its corporate parenting role seriously. It monitors the work through contact with the member who sits on panel and the twice yearly written reports about the management and outcomes of the adoption service. There are also established monitoring and auditing arrangements for the service and further improvements are planned. For example, work is being undertaken to improve the quality and timeliness of life story books for children, as well as the quality of CPRs. However, the agency recognises further development is required.

There are appropriate policies and procedures in place for case recording. Records are securely maintained to protect their confidentiality and appropriate administrative systems are in place. However some records are not clear, accurate and are not always, signed and dated by the relevant parties. This means children may have access to information relating to them, which is unclear and inaccurate.

The premises are of a good standard. Staff expressed satisfaction with their working conditions, security systems and administrative support. Archives are safely stored at other premises and are easily available for staff to access.

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 agency promotes all children's educational needs (NMS 7)
- ensure life story work, books and later life letters are of a consistent quality and provided in a timely manner. For example, life story books are provided within ten days of the adoption ceremony (NMS 2.7)
- ensure that the agency is active in its efforts to obtain for the child clear and

appropriate information from birth parents and their families, specifically in ensuring child permanence reports are accurate and of a consistently high quality for a child to understand their heritage (NMS 2.1)

- develop further the procedures for monitoring and controlling the agency (NMS 25.1)
- ensure all records are clear, accurate and signed and dated. (NMS 27 and 27.4)