

Sunderland City Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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Inspector	Rosemary Chapman / Stephen Smith
Type of inspection	Full

Setting address	Sandhill Centre, Grindon Lane, Sunderland, SR3 4EN
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Registered person	City of Sunderland
Registered manager	Jenny Parkin
Responsible individual	Meg Boustead
Date of last inspection	24/11/2010

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This is a local authority adoption 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 both pre and post adoption; providing a service to adopted people in relation to access to records and birth records counselling; and providing intermediary services for birth relatives and adopted people. Birth parents are offered counselling and support through in-house arrangements.

In the year ending March 2012 the agency placed 37 children for adoption and approved 16 adoptive families. At the time of the inspection, 28 children were 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**.

This is a good and effective adoption agency which successfully places a much higher than average proportion of its children for adoption, a significant number of whom are older, part of large sibling groups or disabled. Although these children are traditionally seen as harder to place, the agency successfully places a large majority of these within appropriate timescales. It is ambitious for its children and will continue to seek an adoptive placement as long as that remains the best plan for the child, which may then result in taking a longer time than average. It also excels at matching, and is extremely professional and thorough when planning introductions and placements. This results in placements which last. The disruption rate is much lower than the national average, and there have been no disruptions for over two years, despite the large number of children placed and their more complex needs.

Children have good outcomes. They are fully involved in their plans and have an excellent understanding of what is happening to them, as they are prepared very

well by very skilful, sensitive and knowledgeable social workers. People who wish to adopt are thoroughly prepared and assessed so that they have the right competences to be successful adoptive parents. Families are well supported to ensure they can successfully meet the needs of children placed with them. Good and effective multidisciplinary working contributes to the positive outcomes which children experience. As a result, children live in safe and secure families who meet their needs.

The whole service, including members, managers and staff, are fully committed to adoption, and demonstrate a high level of understanding, skills, experience and qualifications to enable them to provide an effective service. Leaders and managers are ambitious for the service and have a good and realistic understanding of its strengths and weaknesses. Since the last inspection they can demonstrate a number of improvements which have resulted in more positive outcomes for children.

Areas for further development include continuing to ensure that timescales for children are met, particularly when looking at a child's need for permanence, further using the views of children to improve the service and improving access to psychological support.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- continue to develop ways of using the wishes, feelings and views of children to monitor and develop the service (NMS 1.6)
- ensure children have prompt access to specialist services, with particular reference to psychological support (NMS 5.4)
- continue to improve on adhering to timescales, particularly in addressing the child's need for a permanent home and making a permanence plan at the four month review. (Adoption and Children Act 2002 Statutory Guidance paragraph 2.2)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **good**.

Children are very clearly involved in the plans for their adoption and contribute their wishes and feelings as appropriate to their age and understanding. These are taken into account as far as possible. For example, a child expressed a wish not to be placed in a family with a daddy and was subsequently placed with a single female adopter. Likewise, when the child's expressed wishes are not in their best interests, this is thoroughly explained to them, for example, if it is not appropriate to be with their siblings despite their wish to be placed together.

Children are very well prepared for their adoptive placement, which enables them to settle and develop positive relationships with their new families while understanding their past. Social workers demonstrate an extremely good understanding of the importance of preparing a child well and use a number of tools to enable them to carry this out effectively and with sensitivity. Likewise, introductions fully take into account the needs of children so they understand what is happening. For example, children have their own child-friendly timetable so they can see what is planned for each day and have a visual representation of when they will be moving.

Children are generally placed without unnecessary delay in families who have been thoroughly assessed as being able to meet all the child's identified needs. The majority of delay is attributable to court processes, such as further family member assessments. Although this is out of the agency's control, it has worked with the courts to improve this, with some positive effect. This agency has a sustained track record of placing siblings together and children who are older and with more complex needs. Children over five years old comprise 12% of children to be placed for adoption, and there is a high proportion of sibling groups, some of whom become joined with current care proceedings which again contributes to delay. Recently the agency has placed children who are 10 years old, three disabled children and seven sibling groups. Despite the increased difficulty of finding appropriate families for larger sibling groups and older children, last year 73% of children were placed within 12 months of the agency decision, and 94% were placed within 12 months of the authority to place. The agency is tireless in its efforts to find suitable families, and actively uses voluntary adoption agencies if it cannot place children with an in-house family. The low disruption rate compared with the national average (there have been no disruptions in the last two years despite high numbers of more complex children being placed) is testament to the effective matching and support, and contributes to children's sense of belonging and security.

Children live in safe and secure families who meet their needs. They make good progress in all aspects of their development and are happy. One social worker commented on 'the massive progress' a child had made since being placed for adoption, and another said, 'the change is incredible'. Social workers describe children as becoming more relaxed, developing very positive relationships with their new families and becoming more self-confident. Children have positive contact with their birth families and their siblings if they are not placed together, to ensure they develop a positive identity and understand their heritage.

Children have their health needs fully met through both universal and specialist services. The medical advisers and looked after children's nurse are involved in health assessments, and ensuring adopters know how best to meet any identified health needs. However, the recent reorganisation of the child and mental health service has led to a delay in accessing psychological support. The agency has recognised and is actively addressing this with its partners.

Children placed for adoption are supported to achieve well at school. The virtual school has effective procedures to ensure adopters are supported to obtain the

preferred school placement for their child. The team offers support with appeals and ensuring personal education plans are progressed within timescales. The team is also involved in accessing financial resources for both extra-curricular activities and tuition to ensure children have the best chance to achieve to their full potential.

Quality of service

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

There is a very high degree of satisfaction with the service. Extremely positive comments were received from stakeholders, adopters, birth parents and children. One birth parent commented about the support: 'It's been really good. I can't fault it.' Adopters speak effusively about their individual social workers, using phrases such as, 'absolutely brilliant', 'excellent', and, 'I can't heap enough praise; I could not have asked for more.' Stakeholders have been similarly impressed and comment that the service is 'impressive and child-focused'.

Information evenings are held regularly and advertised widely so that anyone interested in knowing more about adoption can find out without delay. Adopters commented that these were 'very informative'. Adopters are very positive about the information and counselling and preparation courses, and comment that they really helped them understand all the issues, were delivered very sensitively and encouraged questions and debate in a safe forum. Assessments are thorough but not perceived as being overly intrusive. The preparation and assessment of adopters have been strengthened following learning from feedback and are now far more focused on the experiences of the child, attachment, grief and loss. This results in adopters who are resilient and equipped with the competences to parent adopted children effectively. More courses are available to applicants through the joint arrangement which has been put in place with another local authority so that adopter approval is not delayed. A very large majority of adopters are approved within eight months of application, and those who are not have specific justifiable reasons for the delay. The agency is able to use a number of well-established independent social workers to complete assessments to prevent delay.

Life story work is thoroughly embedded in the work of the agency. Children's social workers engage in high quality planned and sensitive direct work with children to ensure they know what is happening to them and understand the reasons. This results in children who are well prepared to move on to their adoptive families, understanding the past but ready to embrace the future. The work is underpinned by life story books and later life letters of a high quality which children receive in a timely way. Child permanence reports are of a consistently good standard, and contain the views, wishes and feelings of parents and children where possible.

The agency is creative and innovative in its approach to family finding. It has embraced a more adopter-led approach through the 'Opening Minds' events, which enable prospective adopters to see DVDs of children and speak to foster carers and social workers to get a realistic picture of a child and their needs. This results in adopters considering children who have needs which they may otherwise have not

considered, and has proved very effective in making good matches. It is also proactive when assessing adopters who may be appropriate for the children they know who are waiting. Additionally it is working with a local voluntary adoption agency to provide concurrent carers so that very young children can be placed without delay. The manager has already explored the possibility of adoption parties as another creative way of family finding. It is tireless in its efforts to find families for children who are seen as traditionally harder to place, and one social worker commented: 'We do not give up.'

Family finding, matching and introductions are carried out with great professionalism. Adopters are provided with a significant amount of information to enable them to make an informed decision about whether they can meet a child's particular needs. This includes meeting with the medical adviser, foster carer, and life appreciation days. The standard of adoption placement reports is very high, and they very clearly outline the reasons for the match and how parental responsibility is going to be exercised. Introductions are very well thought out, with thorough pre-planning meetings which all the professionals attend. Introductions are thoroughly reviewed at a suitable mid-point to ensure everyone is happy with the proposed placement and the timing of it. This enables any doubts to be expressed and amendments made. The quality of information which adopters receive is excellent and presented in a very professional way, to give added value to the significant documents in a child's life. A stakeholder commented that the information provided was of excellent quality, and fully shared with adopters in a timely manner.

The adoption panel is robust and provides effective additional quality assurance of the work of the agency. The whole panel meets with the agency decision maker on a twice yearly basis to provide thorough feedback on its work to drive improvement. Agency decision making is rigorous, well considered and timely.

Adoption support is systematic, well organised and based on a thorough assessment which informs a well-thought out plan that is shared with the family. The social workers work hard to access services when children are placed out of Sunderland and have been successful in achieving this in relation to psychological input and educational provision. The agency offers two social events a year which adoptive families attend and is in the early stages of developing a children's group. The agency works sensitively with adopted adults and birth relatives in relation to access to records and intermediary services in recognition of the life-long implications of adoption.

There is effective and sensitive engagement with birth parents, both by children's social workers and the worker in the adoption team. This includes individual work, such as assistance with letter writing to support contact for the benefit of the child. The worker also supports birth parents with the one-off meeting with adopters, including helping them frame questions. This has a positive impact on future contact arrangements so that children maintain a strong sense of their heritage. The letterbox provides a robust and safe service. Adopters engage well with this and clearly understand the importance of sustaining contact for the benefit of the child. In some instances, children, when they reach an appropriate age, take over the

letter writing, showing how open and understanding adopters are in promoting contact. A birth parent was supported to make a DVD about her experiences which is shown during the information and counselling course. This assists applicants to engage more empathetically with birth families and thus facilitate positive discussions and contact more effectively. Birth mothers are additionally supported by monthly support groups, and the agency has plans to start a birth fathers' group as it has recognised this as a need.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Children feel safe and are safe in their adoptive families, and their well-being is promoted in all ways. The people who work for the agency are subject to rigorous recruitment checks to ensure they are suitable people to work with children and other service users. Applicants who wish to adopt are thoroughly assessed and all appropriate checks and references are carried out, including those from former partners and employers. There is a good focus on ensuring enquirers understand the full impact of a child's previous experiences, including those relating to abuse and neglect, on their subsequent behaviour; this is fully addressed during the information and counselling course, preparation and assessment. This results in adopters who understand the challenges of parenting an adopted child and are fully prepared with appropriate strategies to meet that challenge. This includes developing a safe care plan which is relevant to the specific child and their own family circumstances.

Children are safeguarded by regular visits from their social worker and the adopters' social worker. Visiting arrangements can be flexible to suit the needs of the child. For example, a child placed out of Sunderland, and thus more vulnerable because of the distance, was visited more frequently by the social worker because of the good relationship in place. This afforded that child a greater degree of support and security. The children's guide is very child-friendly and gives good information about how a child can contact a number of agencies, including independent support if this becomes necessary.

Adopters are prepared to tackle any incidents of bullying and are also fully aware of the dangers of unsolicited contact through social networking sites. Where there have been issues of a safeguarding nature, children and adopters are fully supported by staff who are open and honest about their role and the primary need to protect children. Staff are fully aware of their safeguarding responsibilities through regular training and access to relevant procedures and guidance. Any adults using the service are similarly protected by social workers who deliver the service in a safe and sensitive way, underpinned by safeguarding procedures which also consider historical abuse.

Leadership and management

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

This local authority is passionately committed to adoption as a positive placement choice for children. As a result, a significantly higher proportion of looked after children leave care through adoption (28%), compared with either the national average (13%) or its statistical neighbours. This includes children who are disabled, older and part of large sibling groups, demonstrating the ethos for ensuring that any child for who adoption is appropriate are afforded that opportunity. One social worker commented: 'We don't give up on anyone.' Not only are a large proportion of children adopted, they remain in stable adoptive family placements, as the disruption rate is significantly below the national average. A shortfall which has been recognised by leaders and managers is the timescale of the child's journey to adoption. There has been significant effort to tackle this issue at all stages; leaders and managers have analysed the reasons for delay and taken rigorous steps to address them, resulting in an improving picture for children looked after in the last 12 months. They have also arranged for a diagnostic assessment to assist them further in analysing the reasons and driving improvement.

Once adoption is identified as the plan, there are good systems to monitor and track the child's progress to prevent drift. The permanence monitoring group has been strengthened as a means of undertaking this more effectively. The adoption manager is made aware at an early stage of all the children who may require an adoptive placement to enable her to plan recruitment, assessment and family finding more effectively and prevent delay.

Recruitment of adopters is well planned to take account of the needs of the children requiring adoptive families, most of whom are white British. This is enhanced by the good reputation the local authority has in the area; many adopters apply to Sunderland as it has been recommended to them. There is regular advertising, use of various media, and very regular information evenings, all of which are evaluated for their effectiveness. More recently, the agency has developed links with a well-known organisation which promotes gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender fostering and adoption to further increase the number of enquirers who apply to Sunderland, and has approved and matched a number of same-sex couples. Children who cannot be placed with families recruited by Sunderland are promptly identified, and family finders make strenuous efforts to find families elsewhere. There is no cap on the use of voluntary adoption agencies to place children.

There is regular rigorous monitoring and reporting to the corporate parenting group, to ensure the council members are fully aware of how Sunderland is performing in relation to adoption. The reports indicate an honest and accurate picture of the strengths and shortfalls and how these are going to be addressed. Leaders and managers demonstrate a very positive attitude to learning from complaints, disruptions, research and feedback. For example, the information and counselling course has been significantly strengthened to be more focused on how the needs of children impact on an adoptive family. The agency asks for feedback from adopters at many stages of the process. It also learns from the views of children but the agency has recognised this is an area which could be developed further. As a result they are in the process of developing a children's group for those young people for whom the social events are no longer appropriate, with a particular focus initially on

updating the children's guide.

There are very effective relationships with a number of partner agencies, including health, education and other adoption agencies, all of whom work together for the benefit of the child and more positive outcomes. One stakeholder commented: 'I have never been more impressed with a local authority. They have a can-do attitude.' However, despite its good reputation and positive feedback, this agency is not complacent and wants to continue to develop and improve. There are number of initiatives, either planned or already initiated, such as adoption parties, concurrency and co-working with another local authority. The agency has also fully addressed the three recommendations from the previous inspection, resulting in very good and consistent information for children and adopters, and clarity regarding actions to take in relation to historical abuse. This has strengthened matching and the stability of placements and improved safeguarding.

The agency provides good and clear information about adoption on its website and through professional leaflets, all of which can be translated into other languages and formats if necessary. The Statement of Purpose is child-focused, the children's guide is child-friendly and all information is readily accessible to ensure anyone who wants to know about adopting through Sunderland can easily obtain the information.

Staff and managers are very experienced, appropriately qualified, knowledgeable and skilled in working with all aspects of adoption. Children's social work teams work well together and with the adoption team for the common purpose of securing the best possible outcomes for children. They have mutual respect for each other and their respective roles. Staff feel well supported by managers at all levels, and describe senior managers as 'approachable'. They are afforded good training opportunities and encouraged to attend to improve and develop their skills and knowledge further. One social worker commented: 'I cannot fault Sunderland from a training perspective. They have looked after me.' Staff receive good and regular supervision to enable them to reflect on and develop their practice. Social workers also comment about the ethos of Sunderland and its managers saying: 'Children's needs come first.'

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.