

Leeds City Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for la adoption agency

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Inspector	Stephen Smith / Sue Winson
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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 outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

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

Leeds City Council's adoption service undertakes all its statutory responsibilities associated with current adoption legislation and regulations. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters, the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters and providing support for these placements. It also provides post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, including support for birth parents, birth records counselling and intermediary work. It provides adoption support services directly and through commissioning arrangements with voluntary agencies. In addition, the service operates and maintains a letter box system. This supports information exchange in adoption placements.

Summary

This was an announced inspection of the adoption service. The purpose of the inspection was to evaluate its performance against the adoption national minimum standards. All the standards were inspected under the outcome areas of staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and organisation. The adoption service's promotion of equality and diversity was also inspected. During the inspection inspectors had direct contact with four adopted children although their young age meant that consultation was not possible.

This is a good adoption service with significant strengths. It operates with a clear focus on providing good outcomes for children through adoption. It is well managed strategically and operationally and has made significant developments and improvements to its practice since the last inspection. It has systems to plan and direct adoption work. These help ensure that children with a plan for adoption are placed with suitable, well prepared and supported adopters in a timely manner. The service undertakes good assessments of prospective adopters that prepare them well to look after children. Assessments of applicants' suitability are generally sound and thorough but checks are not as rigorous as they should be in every case. The safety of children placed with adopters is well considered but checks on the risk of adopters' pets are not extended to a sufficiently wide range of animals. Good information is provided about children when adoption plans are being considered. This helps ensure children are placed with closely matched families. The adoption panel carefully scrutinises assessments and plans for children. It makes very clear recommendations along with the reasons for these. This supports the very rigorous decision-making process.

The authority provides support to people affected by adoption that is of outstanding quality. It engages creatively with partner agencies to provide flexible, individualised, proactive and effective support wherever this is needed. Needs are well assessed and careful monitoring ensures that the services provided are being effective. Birth parents are offered good support and the service monitors arrangements to assess the level of take-up of this support. Birth parents views are sought robustly to support the adoption process. Significant efforts are made to ensure that children are helped to understand their life story. The service provides adoption support to a large number of people who have been affected by adoption in their past. This is placing a pressure on the service resulting in a waiting list. The delay created by this means that some people do not receive the support they need promptly enough.

The adoption service has undergone significant recent developments and is a service that is well equipped to successfully undertake the work it does. It works very effectively with children's social work teams and other agencies. Information for children within the children's guide is not as well developed as it should be. This means that not all children are helped sufficiently well to understand their adoption.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection a number of recommendations were made to improve the adoption service.

It was required to ensure it had sufficient staff to undertake its responsibilities, retain full information relating to the recruitment of staff and panel members and improve its quality assurance procedures. These requirements have all been addressed.

It was also recommended that the authority undertake a range of actions to improve its service. These included the need to improve the quality of child permanence reports and prospective adopters reports, to improve the quality, consistency and storage of records and to ensure that the premises used were suitable. It was asked to improve some of its panel arrangements and give attention to decision making to ensure it was timely. It was also asked to ensure that children's wishes and feelings about their adoption were fully taken into account and recorded. The adoption service has addressed these recommendations.

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.

Leeds City Council adoption service has an effective and successful adoptive parent recruitment strategy. This sets out its eligibility criteria and makes clear the needs of children looking for adoptive families. This strategy is based upon good, early information about the needs of children for whom adoption may be the plan. Recruitment activity considers the needs of these children so that the service assesses and approves adopters who can meet these needs. The suitability of people to adopt is considered on an inclusive basis, based on the needs of children, irrespective of applicants' race, sexuality, disability or marital status. The service responds to enquiries promptly and provides good information and counselling for prospective adopters.

The preparation, training and assessment of prospective adopters are thorough. Prospective adopters are well prepared to meet the needs of children placed with them. Assessment reports are well written, evaluative and provide the adoption panel with the necessary information on which to make its recommendations. Generally the suitability of applicants is checked out well although status checks and references are not sufficiently robust in every case. Prospective adopters' homes are assessed to identify and deal with potential health and safety risks to children. However, safety assessments on the pets of prospective adopters do not cover a sufficiently wide range of animals and this could potentially lead to a risk of harm to a child. Adopters who applied to adopt around two years ago experienced some initial delay. More recent applicants did not experience this delay as the service has increased its capacity significantly in this area. All regarded the assessment process highly once it commenced. One

said 'We were well prepared and excellently supported by a professional and knowledgeable worker.' Preparation training includes input from adoptive parents and foster carers and is of high quality.

Information sharing between children's social work teams and the adoption team is good. This enables potential matches for children who may need adoption to be considered early and helps reduce delay. Planning for children has improved since the last inspection and is now generally good. Adoption and field social work staff work together well to find adoptive families and arrange matches between children and adopters. The authority works closely with the local adoption consortium and refers to the adoption register as necessary to find adoptive parents for children for whom there are no appropriate adopters locally. Matching decisions are clearly recorded and robustly made. Consequently the authority's children who require adoptive families are matched and placed with suitable, well-prepared and well-matched adopters in a timely manner.

The authority has undertaken a significant amount of work to improve the quality of the child permanence reports produced and is continuing to work in this area. As a result, these documents not only assist the matching process well but are written in a style that is more suitable for a child's reference in later life. Adoption placement reports are of very good quality and provide panel and the decision maker with a very clear summary of the proposed match, its strengths and vulnerabilities, and how these can be supported.

The adoption panel is correctly constituted and well managed. It undertakes its responsibilities thoroughly. It gives good consideration to the reports submitted and does its best to make applicants who are attending panel feel at their ease. It makes clear recommendations, records the reasons for these well and provides the service with good feedback on the quality of work presented to it.

Decision making on adoption matters within the authority is impressively thorough which ensures children have the most suitable placements. The authority has experienced difficulties in ensuring decisions were made in a timely manner but has now addressed this. This helps reduce any unnecessary delay for children.

The managers and staff of the agency are suitably experienced in adoption and appropriately qualified. Adoption staff understand the adoption process and its consequences. They clearly focus on promoting the well-being of children. The authority's recruitment procedures are rigorous and ensure that staff and panel members who work for the purposes of the adoption service are suitable people with the appropriate qualifications to carry out their roles.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Leeds City Councils adoption service provides outstanding support to people whose lives have been touched by adoption. It works proactively and creatively with other agencies and services to provide flexible, effective and well-managed support based on the individually assessed needs of the people involved. The adoption support service engages closely with health and educational professionals, therapeutic social workers, children's social workers and independent providers to meet people's need for support.

Children placed for adoption and their adoptive families are well prepared. The service provides clear information and input about the support available to prospective adopters both before and, in more detail, after their approval. Introductions of children to their new families are very well managed with all parties being clear of the key messages to be demonstrated to children to help them transfer their attachment.

After placement, visits and reviews take place in a timely manner. Adoption support plans are well developed, implemented and monitored for their effectiveness. A creative range of support services are provided. These include a soft play group for adoptive parents with younger children, 'buddying' arrangements and regular support groups for adopters. They also include newsletters, training events, a psychotherapy group for adopted teenagers and a supported lodgings scheme for adopted young people to help them with the transition into adulthood. These services are provided either by the authority or through well-managed commissioned arrangements with adoption support agencies. Direct therapeutic and psychological support is provided individually where needed including play therapy, attachment work and support within school settings. Arrangements are in place for access to these services to be 'fast-tracked' for adopted children and families. For example, a fortnightly adoption clinic is held jointly by the child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) and the adoption support team. The 'virtual school' for looked after children extends its support fully to adopted children. This focus on supporting families helps provide positive outcomes for children. For example one family said that the adoption support provided 'has been fantastic; a true life saver to us over the years'.

Support to people affected by adoption, including tracing, birth records counselling, intermediary work and birth parent support is provided by the service and by a commissioned service with an adoption support agency. The letterbox arrangements for maintaining contact between adopted children and their birth families are managed effectively despite the growing number of contacts handled by this letterbox. Intermediary work is also managed well. Demand for this work and the increasing numbers of contacts managed through the letter box are placing a pressure on the service and a waiting list for intermediary work has developed. The authority has very good monitoring arrangements that ensure appropriate levels of service are being provided through commissioned agencies.

Specialist advice and support resources are readily accessible. Medical advice and support provided to the agency and adopters is of excellent quality. The medical advisers meet all adopters and children and play a significant role in ensuring placements meet children's needs. Advice is provided to inform all areas of adoption decision making. Legal advice is always provided at panel. Other resources and specialist services are sourced whenever necessary.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The service recognises the significance of children's backgrounds and histories. It understands how important they are in children's understanding of themselves and their place in the world. It has good arrangements to support birth parents and to engage them in providing information and their views to support the adoption process. Work with birth families includes seeking their views, wherever possible, about the sort of family they would prefer for their children and these are taken into account when matches are considered. Social workers work hard to capture the views of birth parents about adoption and to seek information for inclusion in child permanence reports and life story work. The service receives detailed management information from the

voluntary agency commissioned to provide independent support and counselling for birth parents. In this way it is able to monitor the effectiveness of its work in this area.

The agency regards life story work for children being adopted as important. Since the last inspection a significant drive has taken place to ensure that adopted children receive life story work and good quality later life letters to help support their placements and their understanding of their past. Children's social workers understand the importance of this work and the need to commence work to gather information early. Life story work is undertaken with children to help prepare them for adoption and to support them when they are with their new families. Foster carers support life story work by providing children with good information, mementos and photographs of their life with them. The adoption support team, therapeutic social workers and CAMHS work, where required, to help children understand and come to terms with their background, heritage and life story. All adopted children receive a life story book although these are not always completed before the adoption order is made. The service closely monitors the completion of life story books to promote their completion in a timely manner. This means that children's ability to understand their past experiences is appropriately supported by the adoption service.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Equality and diversity pervades the authority's procedures and practice. The service recruits adopters from a diverse range of backgrounds to meet the different needs of children who need adoptive families. Assessments of prospective adopters consider applicants' abilities to respect and promote diversity and preparation training is delivered in a way that challenges prejudice and preconception. The service works hard to ensure that children are matched with adopters who are able to meet their needs and where possible reflect their background and heritage. The authority strives to locate the most appropriate family for each individual child whether these are from within the authority or elsewhere. It provides adoption support of a very high quality to all people whose lives have been touched by adoption.

The organisation has a Statement of Purpose in place which was last reviewed in July 2010. Since then the adoption service has seen a restructure and significant growth. The Statement of Purpose does not currently accurately describe the adoption service.

The adoption service has a children's guide to adoption and one for adoption support to give to children affected by adoption. The children's guide to adoption contains information about how to contact Ofsted but does not contain the address and contact details of the Children's Rights Director as is required by adoption regulations. In terms of presentation, the guides are satisfactory for older children but do not meet the needs of younger children or those with learning disabilities or who find reading difficult. Therefore not all children are assisted to understand the adoption process as well as they could be.

The management of the adoption service, at a strategic and operational level, is effective. Since the last inspection the adoption service has seen considerable investment and increased in size and scope. New staff members have been appointed and an additional manager. This has

increased the capacity of the service and removed a waiting list for prospective adopters. Adoption processes are well monitored and managed and this ensures that children with a plan for adoption are found suitable and well-prepared families in a timely manner. However, there is not a sufficient resource allocation given to intermediary work and a waiting list for this work has built up. Effective management ensures that the key functions of the adoption service operate well. For example, the quality of recording has significantly improved since the last inspection and processes are well monitored and managed to ensure that they operate efficiently and without delay. Adoption staff and their managers are committed to their roles and work to a high standard. Relationships between the adoption service and children's social workers are good and this helps planning for children. The service provides its staff with very good direct support. Training and development opportunities for staff are good with access to both internal and external training courses.

Effective arrangements exist to ensure that any records relating to children's adoption are maintained with appropriate confidentiality. The service operates from suitable premises with appropriate storage arrangements and information systems in place. Archived files are stored securely.

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 applicants are considered in terms of their capacity to look after children in a safe and responsible way. Specifically, ensure that safety assessments consider risks presented by a wider range of family pets (NMS 4.6)
- ensure that rigorous status checks and enquiries are undertaken about all prospective adopters (NMS 4.8)
- ensure the Statement of Purpose accurately describes the facilities and services provided. Specifically, ensure that it is updated to reflect the new structure of the adoption service (NMS 1.1)
- ensure that the children's guide is produced in different formats to meet the needs of different groups of children and contains information on how a child can contact the Children's Rights Director (NMS 1.4) (breach of Regulation 3(1) of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003)
- ensure that the staffing complement is adequate to meet the needs of the adoption agency. Specifically, ensure that sufficient staffing resources are devoted to intermediary, tracing and birth records counselling work. (NMS 21.2)