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 large local authority adoption service. Its main functions are to actively recruit, train and assess prospective adopters, carefully match and place children with approved adopters and provide ongoing post-adoption support services. These include arranging and supporting contact arrangements, enabling access to birth records, facilitating support groups and counselling.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This judgement is reached following a full inspection over six days by two inspectors, following an agreed programme which ensured the active involvement of a diverse range of children and young people, adopters and staff. Compliance with all the regulations and national minimum standards was assessed and the consequent outcomes for children and young people were evaluated.

Overall, there are good arrangements in place to safeguard and promote the welfare of looked after children and, due to careful matching, those in adoption placements are happy, settled and feel safe and secure. There are also particularly good outcomes in respect of children's physical and emotional health and some exceptional educational progress. Children confirmed this, saying, 'I am healthy and I see doctors, opticians and the dentist' and, 'I like school. I have friends and my teachers are nice. I have speech therapy and I am getting better at talking.' Children's social workers confirm that, 'personal educational allowances have helped children progress in a number of areas.'

Children and young people's views are also respected and supported about continued contact with birth families. Moreover, there are good opportunities for children and young people to positively contribute to their daily lives and futures and in the continued development of the adoption service.

The service is well managed ensuring staff receive clear direction and leadership and are suitably supported, supervised and trained to competently undertake their respective roles. Moreover, they are all actively encouraged to play their part in continually developing and improving the service to children and young people, adopters and birth families with the full support of senior managers and lead councillors in the children's directorate.

The recent restructuring into a centralised service and establishing more robust performance management systems is resulting in gradual, yet significant improvements. However, there still remain children and young people waiting for an adoption placement and approved adopters waiting for children. Also, the quality of
child permanency reports, life story work and later life letters is variable, although ongoing training is already planned to try to address this. Recruitment and selection and health and safety processes are not always sufficiently robust.

**Improvements since the last inspection**

The four recommendations made at the last inspection on 28 February 2008 have been satisfactorily addressed. Consequently, since March 2010 preparation courses are undertaken over three rather than two days to enable applicants to absorb and reflect on the content. An independent review of the service was also undertaken, which included the evaluation of the support services being purchasing. An outcome of this is the establishment of an in-house post-adoption support team which is constantly developing and increasing the services offered to children and young people, adopters and birth families and is proving to be good value for money. A protocol has also been developed showing the timescales for the production of life story books.

**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 service ensures a robust matching process. Consequently, children and young people benefit from stable placements which meet all or most of their assessed needs and unique preferences and there have been no disruptions prior to an adoption order being made. Children are also well prepared for adoption and when they are initially placed their routines are sensitively and closely followed to give them a feeling of familiarity and security. Consequently, they settle very quickly and are ‘relaxed and contented’.

All the staff have access to all local protocols and are trained in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of looked after children to ensure an appropriate response to any disclosures. Moreover, the service works effectively with other relevant authorities to ensure children are protected from all forms of abuse. Consequently children feel safe and secure. One social worker said, ‘the adoption service communicates with us and a wide range of professionals in order to promote good outcomes for children’.

Training for adopters enables them to explore the importance of achieving the balance between ensuring a child’s safety yet allowing them to take risks appropriate to their age and understanding. However, the health and safety processes are not sufficiently robust to ensure that all adopters obtain safety equipment in a timely manner.
Children’s specific health needs are very well met. The service actively supports adopters to promote children’s good health including providing good quality information to ensure adopters are empowered to make informed decisions. Adopters also ensure that children continue to attend statutory medicals and routine health appointments. Consequently, as examples, children with developmental delay due to being born suffering from drug and alcohol withdrawal, are now meeting all their developmental milestones and some significant skin, breathing and eye conditions have all completely cleared.

Children and young people also enjoy healthy diets and a good range of physical activities which promote their continued development including swimming lessons, hiking, cycling, football and gym clubs. Specialist services are also provided in a timely manner to meet specific needs including improving the emotional and psychological well-being of children and young people. This input has resulted in some children being able to control their temper and others having stopped self harming, which in turn has improved their self esteem.

This service actively strives to ensure children are placed within twelve months of the decision that they should be placed for adoption. However, there are still some delays and the executive director is in continued discussions with the courts to try to address this.

**Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is outstanding.

There are outstanding opportunities for children and young people to enjoy and achieve and thereby realise their full potential, and the service hosts an annual event to recognise and celebrate these achievements.

Children and young people are really happy and settled and ‘thriving’ in their placements. They enjoy loving relationships, which have a marked positive effect on their self esteem and confidence. They also benefit from clear and consistent boundaries and are actively praised for good behaviour and effort. They have their own bedrooms which are highly personalised and their privacy is respected appropriate to their age and understanding. One child said, ‘my behaviour is getting better and I don’t have as many paddies now’.

Children and young people enjoy a good range of appropriate and constructive leisure activities. One child said, ‘I like going to the caravan and riding my bike.’ The service also actively encourages, and financially supports, individual interests and hobbies including dancing, judo, cheerleading and horse riding lessons. Consequently some young people are entering national competitions thereby significantly increasing their self confidence.

Children’s education is actively promoted and specialist support provided to meet individual needs including one-to-one classroom support, speech and language
therapy and funding extra lessons and equipment. Consequently children and young people are making excellent progress and some are exceeding expectations. Children are rightly proud of their achievements and their comments include, 'I am doing a lot better at school and my behaviour has got a lot better too', 'my teacher says I could be the top of the class' and, 'I had the main part in the school play'.

Adopters provide homely, child friendly, environments with lots of stimulating age-appropriate toys. They are decorated, furnished and maintained to a good standard of cleanliness and provide sufficient space to comfortably accommodate all who live there.

Adoption support needs are clearly identified and child focussed and a post-adoption support team has recently been established to meet these needs. Services currently provided include support groups in different areas so adopters do not have too far to travel and in excellent venues which offer specialist child care advice. The summer and Christmas events were also well attended and thoroughly enjoyed and have been used to maintain positive contact with siblings. Feedback from these events include, 'overall a great day. It was nice for my children to see that they are two of many children that are placed with adoptive families'.

A very new, responsive and creative development is the deployment of experienced clinical psychologists. They work directly with children and young people, birth families and adopters to meet specific needs or support staff to develop their own skills in providing direct work. They also actively encourage adopters to build up their own resilience and confidence to deal with challenging situations and will review existing interventions to ensure they remain appropriate and are good value for money. Without exception this service is greatly appreciated. The feedback is excellent and the outcomes to date are very good. Services users describe this needs-led support as 'fantastic.' They say, 'it is a respectful service' in that they are, 'fully involved and given genuine choices' so they 'feel empowered' and consequently are, 'more empathetic in their response to future difficulties'.

Adopters confirm that they know they can access any of this support at any time in the future if required and are regularly kept updated through the newsletter. The handbook is particularly well written in user friendly language. A balanced and realistic view is presented and shows excellent understanding of the potential concerns of adopters and birth parents.

**Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

Children's views, wishes and feelings are actively sought in respect to their day-to-day lives and futures. Opportunities include participation in personal education plans, life story work and in statutory reviews. Moreover, some are actively involved in the development of the service and are represented on the corporate parenting board so they can put their views directly to councillors. However, the quality of some of these documents is variable. In particular, the views of younger children are not
consistently recorded.

Children and young people confirm that they all have someone they would speak to if they had a problem and that they know how to formally complain should the need arise. User-friendly leaflets are available clearly explaining the process, but they do not include the contact details of the national director for children's rights.

Prospective adopters are well prepared and supported to meet the child's social and emotional development. This includes good quality preparation and ongoing training, well-attended support groups and life appreciation days. Consequently, children and young people have positive self-esteem and are clear about their identity. Information about their backgrounds includes child's permanence reports, life story books, memory boxes and later life letters. However, not all adopters have received later life letters in a timely manner. Moreover, they are not always written in a format that is suited to the individual young person.

Constructive contact in line with legal directions and personal preferences is actively encouraged and supported. Indeed, there is some outstanding practice in maintaining direct contact with birth parents and siblings post adoption in the interests of the children, for example, the financing of annual visits for children who have moved abroad. Adopters report that the training sessions on contact were 'invaluable and reassuring'.

The service works hard to engage birth families in adoption planning and their views are valued and respected, for example, ensuring the child is placed with adopters who will promote their preferred faith. They also have access to independent advocacy and good quality counselling to help them explore any concerns they may have.

A key function of the post-adoption support team is enabling access to birth records. Information about the adoption contact register is also made available and direct work provided to adopted adults and birth parents who wish to resume contact to try to ensure this is a positive and beneficial experience.

**Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

**Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The management team in the children's directorate are suitably qualified, highly experienced and extremely child focussed and the continued development of the service is very well supported by directors and councillors. Staff report that the manager of the adoption service 'has a very clear strategic vision and has the skills
to empower and motivate staff.'

However, some staff remain unsettled following relatively recent restructuring into a centralised service. There are also a number of posts that are currently temporary and they particularly notice the loss of assistant managers who they describe as, 'steeped in adoption and a constant source of support.' One staff member commented, 'we are in interesting and uncertain times'; some are genuinely feeling that pressure. Nevertheless, they confirm that they 'remain very dedicated to the work and to achieving the best outcomes for children'.

Moreover, throughout the significant and ongoing restructuring they report consistently good supervision, support and relevant ongoing training opportunities to enhance their own personal development. Staff also confirm regular team meetings with open and honest debates and say, 'supervision is a priority and is very helpful' and, 'the service is generally very good in respect to our learning.' Recent external courses attended include, working with black and ethnic minority children and young people, special guardianships orders and social networking. However, annual appraisals do not currently include the views of children.

An up-to-date Statement of Purpose is in place which accurately describes the aims, policies and practices of the service. A user-friendly children's guide is also in place to ensure young people know the services they can expect. However, currently it is only in one format which does not meet all the diverse needs of the children and young people accessing the adoption service.

More robust performance management systems are now in place to ensure that everyone involved in the adoption service is fully aware of the strengths and areas for development of the adoption service and the role they play as individuals and teams in the overall strategic planning.

For example, there is a clear strategy in place to try to ensure that sufficient adopters are recruited and assessed in a timely manner in 2011/12, to meet the unique needs and specific wishes of children and young people. Although improvements are evident, certainly in the last 18 months, a number of adopters report delays in the process and currently not all applications are completed within eight months. Moreover, some say they are not kept regularly informed and comments included, 'it's hard just waiting' and, 'there have been times when I've wondered what was going on. I do think a phone call or e-mail once a month should occur.'

Most adopters confirm satisfaction with the initial enquiry stage and the information received explaining the process. They are also highly satisfied with the assessment process describing it as 'liberating'. Comments include, 'the assessing social worker was great, very supportive, available, encouraging and easy to talk to. I felt comfortable and she was listening without judging me' and, 'the report was very good and thorough and reflected us well.'

Feedback from the training is also consistently very good and especially highlighted
is listening to other adopters. Comments included, 'it is well presented and organised. There is a friendly and relaxed atmosphere so we felt comfortable enough to ask questions', 'listening to an adopter was the highlight of the day hearing first hand her experiences and strategies' and 'it is good that the emphasis is on what's best for the child'.

The frequency of courses have significantly increased and this service has developed a specific training course for second time applicants which is being used by a number of other agencies and on application they are now given the choice of two training dates. Consequently delays are avoided.

A particular strength is the bridging process. An adopter reported: 'It went really well. The foster carers were brilliant and let us handle everything from day one. They also took photographs of us and put them on their fridge so he called us mum and dad as soon as he saw us and we are amazed at how well he has settled.'

There are currently three adoption panels a month to reduce delays in making recommendations about adoption. Each panel has the same chair which aids consistency of practice and they exercise their quality assurance functions of the child permanence and prospective adopter reports presented and will defer if they are not to the required standard. Panel papers are produced in a timely manner to enable them to be carefully scrutinised and to ensure relevant questions are asked and any remaining issues are fully explored.

The agency decision maker is well qualified, suitably experienced, knowledgeable and competent for the role. She scrutinises all documentation thoroughly, taking into account, but not always following, the recommendation of the adoption panel, thereby ensuring that children are well matched to adopters and their diverse and individual needs are met.

However, the central list of persons considered suitable to be members of an adoption panel is not up to date. Moreover, not all staff and panel members’ recruitment files evidence a stringent process. For example, there is insufficient documentary evidence that telephone enquiries are made to verify written references and exploring any gaps in employment histories. They are also not indexed making close monitoring difficult.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Children and young people, adopters and birth families are treated and respected as individuals in their own right and a range of specialist services is provided to best meet their diverse and complex needs.

There are robust processes in place to ensure files are well maintained including clear guidance for staff on what should be in every section. Adoption files are audited by the manager in preparation for supervision sessions and prior to transfer from the child protection and legal team to the children awaiting adoption team children's files are checked for compliance with the regulations.

The premises and administrative systems are suitable to enable the agency to meet
its Statement of Purpose. It is appropriately insured and an up-to-date business continuity plan is in place which includes the security of records.

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 health and safety processes are sufficiently robust to protect children from accidents (NMS 4)
- ensure personal education plans, life story books and later life letters are produced in a timely manner and are all in a format appropriate to each child's age and understanding (NMS 2.6-2.8)
- ensure the children's guide and the complaints leaflet includes the contact details of the children's rights director (NMS 1.4)
- ensure there is clear documentary evidence that prospective and approved adopters are kept informed, on a regular basis, of the progress of their application and the efforts made to match a child (NMS 10.2)
- ensure the children's guide is produced in a range of formats appropriate to each child's age and understanding (NMS 18.5)
- ensure there is a robust system in place in respect of the safe recruitment to, and maintenance of, the central list of persons considered suitable to be members of an adoption panel (NMS 17.1)
- ensure there is clear documentary evidence that the service consistently follows stringent recruitment practices and all the required checks and references are obtained and followed up, as necessary, prior to commencing employment (NMS 21.3)
- ensure staff appraisals take into account the views of children and young people. (NMS 24.6)