

Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales

Care Standards Act 2000

Adoption and Children Act 2002

Inspection Report

Adoption Service Flintshire

Mold
CH7 6NN

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Introduction

In 2010 all six North Wales local authorities established, under a partnership agreement, a single adoption service for North Wales. Flintshire County Council adoption agency has therefore, whilst retaining legal responsibility for their adoption agency and service, delegated responsibility for managing the day to day operation of the service to The North Wales Adoption Service (NWAS). The manager of NWAS is Mandy Humphries.

Two adoption social workers are employed by and accommodated within the offices of Flintshire County Council. NWAS has an office in Wrexham.

NWAS provides services to prospective and approved adopters, to birth parents and to people who have been adopted and their wider family members. A contract is in place with After Adoption for intermediary services to be provided. A contact service is provided to arrange and monitor the direct and indirect contact arrangements that have been agreed for adopted children. Prospective adopters who seek an adoption with a foreign element are referred by NWAS to an agency that specialises in such work.

Inspection methods

Local authority adoption services are inspected once every three years. The inspection of this service, which was a scheduled, announced inspection, started on 8 May 2012 and was carried out by two inspectors. A pre-inspection meeting was held with the manager of NWAS and a social work manager. The inspection activity extended over a period of three weeks to enable visits to be made to adoptive parents and for feedback to Flintshire and NWAS.

Evidence was gathered through the Self Assessment of Service (SAS) submitted before the inspection and from questionnaires returned by adopters and staff. Discussions were held with the NWAS manager, staff from the adoption team, with looked after children (LAC) team members and with three adopters who were visited in their homes. Meetings were held with the operations manager and head of service for Flintshire. A selection of children's adoption files and those of their adopters were assessed, as were the files of staff and files of the After Adoption service. The archive storage of adoption files was examined. The inspectors were provided with a range of documents that related to the service, including the current policies and procedures.

Summary of inspection findings

What does the service do well?

The information on adoption on the NWAS website, accessed via the Flintshire County Council website, is comprehensive and clear.

There is a diversity of adopters and an increased ability of the service to place children in North Wales

The assessments of prospective adopters have become more analytical.

To respond to the increased workload the service has employed sessional / fee paid staff.

There are very useful and informative reporting mechanisms of the up to date position in respect of children and adopters within the service.

LAC social workers are developing their knowledge and practice skills in their

work with children who may be adopted.

What has improved since the last inspection?

The timeliness of assessments of adopters has improved with pre-approval training courses held more frequently and the recruitment of sessional workers to deal with assessments in a timely way

Allocating a social worker to the contact service, has allowed enquirers and adopted children to receive a professional service

The purchase of the CHARMS IT system, providing a system that is fit for purpose and available to the service across North Wales

There are no unallocated families awaiting assessment in Flintshire

Prioritising of the assessments of prospective adopters who have the potential to be matched to children who are waiting for adoptive placements e.g. sibling groups

There are an increased number of approved adopters, by comparison year on year

What needs to be done to improve the service?

In respect of issues of non compliance with the Regulations for adoption agencies:

We notified the provider that the service was not compliant with The Adoption Agencies (Wales) Regulations 2005, Regulations 3(5) and 5. This was because an adoption panel may be established by any two but not more than three local authorities. Taking an application from one joint panel of two local authorities to another joint panel of two local authorities resulted in more than three local authorities being involved and the neighbouring joint panel was not the designated approving panel for that local authority. In respect of Regulation 7 it was not clear that the adoption agency and panel had prepared and implemented a written policy and procedural instructions governing the exercise of the agency's and the panel's functions in relation to these matters.

We notified the provider that the service was not compliant with The Adoption Agencies (Wales) Regulations 2005, Regulation 5(3). This was because the written record of panel business for the months of March and April 2012 did not include the reasons for its recommendations.

We notified the provider that the service was not compliant with The Local Authority Adoption Service (Wales) Regulations 2007, Regulations 20(1). This was because written references for staff had not been confirmed by telephone, as specified in Schedule 4.

We notified the provider that the service was not compliant with The Local Authority Adoption Service (Wales) Regulations 2007, Regulations 22. This was because the quality of care review report for the service had not been finalised and made available to stakeholders.

In respect of good practice issues we discussed with the provider:

That the statement of purpose for NAWAS be made available on the website

In consideration of The Adoption Agencies (Wales) Regulations 2005, Regulation

3(3) (c), we found that an appointed member of the adoption panel had not been attending panel meetings regularly and had failed to attend for appointments in relation to the monitoring of panel member's performance.

That they continue to communicate with LAC social workers and managers regarding improving methods of sharing the information available and ways of communicating the up to date position in respect of family finding and potential matches of children and adopters.

That work should be undertaken to establish an improved structure for adoption support plans and that evidence be kept on file that adoption support plans have been fully considered at the matching panel, copies of the support plan have been given to adoptive parents and that support plans are kept under review.

That legal advice should be obtained as necessary regarding the provisions of the Regulations made under the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and the Care Standards Act 2000 as they apply to Welsh local authorities, governing the exercising of the functions of the adoption agency. When such advice has been obtained it would be good practice for it to be recorded.

Quality of life

Children's rights are protected and their security is promoted through thoughtful care planning and timely decision making. Children's case records were comprehensive and easy to read and clearly told the story of why children were unable to return to their birth families. We found that placement for permanence decisions were timely in most cases and where delays had occurred; this was due either to court processes, multiple viability assessments of extended family members or to unresolved health issues for the birth parent or child. In one case, it was evident that the children concerned had needed an extended period of time in foster care, where they could experience warmth and belonging, in order to best prepare them for an adoptive placement.

Children have opportunities to develop feelings of self worth and a positive identity by experiencing warm and consistent care from foster carers prior to adoption. Case records showed evidence of children making significant progress in their emotional development, becoming more relaxed and settled in placement and making progress at school. In discussion and in questionnaires adopters said how helpful foster carers had been in preparing their children for the transition to their adoptive placement. They described learning from and being supported by the foster carers and the crucial role they played in sharing information about the child and their routines.

Children's individual diverse needs and personal histories were clearly set out under the headings of the Childs Assessment Record for Adoption (CARA) document and their anticipated needs were identified in adoption support plans at the 'to be adopted' stage. We found the level of detail in support plans to be most specific where children were older at the point of placement and their future needs, therefore, more apparent. The service has an operational manager appointed as the person to work as the Adoption Support Services Advisor (ASSA). Part of their responsibility is to monitor and review adoption support plans in place but, with the exception of reviews of financial support, the local authority is not able to demonstrate full regulatory compliance in this area.

Adopters reported very good levels of pre-adoption training, which, along with advice given by the assessing social worker, helped to prepare them for the behaviours that they might encounter. Although not always recorded, from discussions with adopters and staff it is evident that the agency responds promptly to requests from adoptive parents who are seeking advice, support and guidance in meeting children's emerging needs. One adopter commented 'We were worried that we were doing something wrong but (the adoption social worker) helped us to see things differently'. Child care staff spoke of the considerable efforts made by adoption workers in trying to find families for children with significant health issues and those with more complex needs. Matching all children with families that fully reflect their ethnicity remains a challenge for the agency.

Birth parents can be confident that their views are recorded and taken into account in the placement of their child. We saw within children's adoption files the work that had been undertaken with birth families both pre and post care proceedings to engage them in the future of their child. Information gathered by social workers for the CARA records the views of parents providing information on the cultural and religious status of the child.

Records of family finding and matching confirmed that children's needs are identified and recognised by social workers. Social workers for looked after children raised the issue that they felt they may be being 'drip fed' possible matches and that they were not often given a range of potential adopters at the same time. During the inspection Flintshire and NWS staff discussed action that they could take to communicate

information to address these perceptions.

NWAS had a service level agreement with 'After Adoption' North West to whom it contracts out support and intermediary services for counselling birth parents and the tracing and reunion for adopted adults and members of birth families. We read case files from After Adoption which recorded the details of individual work to engage and work with birth parents and adults who had been adopted.

Children are supported to have contact, where appropriate, and to have a positive understanding of their birth family. CSSIW did not feel it necessary to look at the detailed operation of the contact service on this occasion because it was considered at the inspection of Wrexham adoption agency in February 2012. However the contact service will be considered at future inspections.

Quality of staffing

People using the service can be confident that social work staff are competent and skilled in their work. Since the establishment of NWAS, after a difficult period of staff shortages and absence, there have been improvements in the staffing arrangements and assessments of potential adopters have been timelier. Arrangements for administrative support have been improved to support the service. Sessional / fee paid social work staff have been employed to meet an increased referral rate and at the time of the inspection there were no Flintshire applicants waiting for their assessment to start. We saw evidence that adoption staff have been recruited effectively. We did however see evidence that when written references had been obtained for a member of staff these had not been checked by a telephone call to the referee. We were able to confirm that staff have access to relevant training courses and receive regular formal and informal support and supervision.

Staff felt well supported by managers. Both adoption social workers and LAC social workers were enthusiastic about their work. They were clear about their responsibilities and the range of needs of children to be placed for adoption and how these should be matched to potential adoptive parents.

Adopters are recruited, assessed and supported by staff who are familiar to them, as turnover and sickness rates are low. A part-time vacancy for an adoption social worker was being recruited to during the inspection. The Flintshire NWAS social workers do not have access to administrative support in their current offices and the administrative support within NWAS is centralised in the Wrexham office. Staff reported that this was difficult at times. We saw that there were delays in receiving documents that had been sent electronically from the NWAS office and which had to be released from password protection by the central IT service.

Adopters reported that they have good interactions with staff who got to know and understand them during the assessment process. This helped when there were discussions about children for whom family finding was being carried out. We were told that staff were accessible and after a child was placed staff made regular visits before the making of an adoption order. Adoptive parents reported that staff were responsive and supportive when they asked for help and advice and we saw that staff were supporting adopters to understand and cope with more complex demands of parenting some children.

Quality of leadership and management

Overall we found that leadership and management of the service was effective and efficient, with adult users of the service reporting good outcomes on the basis of their experiences. Children are safeguarded and, when legal processes have been concluded, are placed with adults who have been appropriately judged to be suitable to care for them by adoption.

The adoption service as described in the statement of purpose, is intended to meet the needs of children who may be adopted, their parents and guardians, persons wishing to adopt a child, adopted persons and their birth parents or guardians. Within the generic document for the six partner authorities the local arrangements are outlined together with aims, objectives and the values under which the service operates.

There are individual booklets for people using different elements of the service but the statement of purpose is not accessible through the NWAS or Flintshire County Council website, therefore information on what the service as a whole sets out to provide is not available.

NWAS undertakes the functions of Flintshire adoption agency and the work is overseen by a partnership board (PB) made up of heads of service from the six North Wales local authorities. An operational managers group (OMG) oversees the work of NWAS and meets monthly with regular reporting from the project manager. Scrutiny of the service has been robust and for a period the OMG was suspended and the PB felt the need to more directly manage the service. However, the OMG has now resumed and a positive development at the time of the inspection was the attendance of fieldwork social work managers at an OMG meeting. It was agreed that social work managers would be made aware of the detail through regular reporting regarding children referred to NWAS and of the availability of prospective adopters.

In light of the findings of non compliance, people using the service can be confident, most of the time that the provider monitors and ensures that the service is provided to a good standard. Staff described the quality assurance systems in place to ensure good social work practice. Records kept were clear and up to date. We found that the quality assurance mechanisms for legal issues have, in some cases, not been sufficiently robust. One panel member had not been attending panel on a regular basis and has not made themselves available when asked to attend for annual appraisal and review. There have been occasions when management decisions have not been sufficiently robust and legal advice could have been obtained by the local authority or NWAS in respect of matters on which action has been taken. Panel records showed that matters relating to an application, which would have usually been put before the joint adoption panel for Conwy and Denbighshire, were put to the Wrexham and Flintshire panel. This was not in compliance with the Regulations. In the minutes of panel meetings we saw that, where recommendations were made to the agency decision maker, the reasons for those recommendations were not recorded.

People using the services can be confident that their personal information was kept securely. Records in day to day use were kept in locked filing cabinets and protective passwords were in use for electronic records. We saw that archiving arrangements were appropriate and access to records was controlled.

A quality of care review report was still in draft and evidence of the quality assurance work undertaken to assess if service users have access to a reflective and improving

service was not publically available. To further enhance the availability of information for service users in an individual local authority, the quality of care monitoring and reviewing mechanisms should capture and reflect on experiences and views of stakeholders in different local authority areas.

While the service has identified or acknowledged some elements of the service that require further consolidation or development we found that the service has established firm foundations in management and service delivery. Adopters and children can be confident that they are safe because the service is well run, with due care and attention to minimum standards and regulations. Where non compliance has been identified the service has acknowledged this and users of the NWAS can be confident that if things are not right they will be addressed quickly.

Quality of Adopters

The SAS for this inspection asked for statistical information regarding the previous 12 months although the inspection of the service covered a three year period. Therefore the information provided with the SAS reflected the previous 12 months.

It was recorded that in the 12 months prior to the completion of the SAS Flintshire County Council, as part of NWAS, had completed 4 assessments of adopters who had been approved to adopt.

Five children had been placed with adopters in Flintshire and 3 adoption orders had been granted.

Eleven assessments were ongoing for prospective adopters living in Flintshire.

NWAS has employed staff to recruit, train and carry out assessments of prospective adopters. The improvements in the times scales for these functions has resulted in more children being placed in more adoptive homes. Having dedicated recruitment and training officers has allowed for well targeted and ongoing recruitment campaigns and responsive training for applicants. As a result children enjoy being cared for by motivated adopters who want to make a positive difference to their lives.

Overall, adopters using the service are clear about what it sets out to provide. Adopters said that their expectations of the service had broadly been matched by their experience. This was illustrated by examples of how social workers had arranged and supported them through matching, introduction and reviewing processes and how placements had been made.

Adopters spoke about the recruitment, training and assessment processes and said that these had been thorough and challenging. We found, as a result of this and the comprehensive assessment of the needs of the individual children, that children were being placed with adopters who were trained and prepared, competent and confident. They wanted to parent the children placed with them and felt that they had information and understanding of the children's individual needs. Where challenges had arisen, individual support and specialist services could be accessed through NWAS, although some adopters found limitations in access to external services.

Children are in safe placements. Evidence in case records and discussion with adopters confirmed that the assessment of prospective adopters was being undertaken, thoroughly and with analysis, in line with statutory requirements. The BAAF Prospective Adopters Report (PAR) was being used to present applicants to panel for consideration. A panel meeting was not observed during this inspection, as the panel was attended during the inspection of Wrexham adoption agency in February 2012. Panel minutes revealed that there was good scrutiny by panel members and that they were asked for their views on an application. However, reasons for panel recommendations were not being summarised and recorded as required.

Each local authority has an agency decision maker. In Flintshire, the agency decision maker confirmed that they read panel minutes prior to making a decision and that they had a telephone discussion with the panel chair about the applications.