

Aberdeenshire Council - Adoption Service

Adoption Service

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Telephone: 01467 532800

Type of inspection:

Announced (short notice)

Completed on:

20 June 2019

Service provided by:

Aberdeenshire Council

Service provider number:

SP2003000029

Service no:

CS2004084094

About the service

The Care Inspectorate regulates care services in Scotland. Information about all care services is available on our website at www.careinspectorate.com

Aberdeenshire Council - Adoption Service has been registered with the Care Inspectorate since the Care Inspectorate was formed in 2011. It was previously registered with the Care Commission.

Aberdeenshire Council - Adoption Service provides an adoption service for children and young people aged from birth to 18 years and their families who are assessed as in need of this service. The agency recruits and supports adoptive parents to provide families for those children who cannot live with their birth parents or extended family members whose needs have been assessed in relation to adoption.

Staff within the service are located throughout the Aberdeenshire Area, most are co-located with social work fieldwork teams, and this means that there are staff in most areas within the council boundary.

Since the last inspection there had been significant changes to the approach to permanence within the service.

In 2018 the service's separate permanence team was disbanded following a full review of the service's effectiveness in reducing drift and delay for vulnerable children requiring permanence. Existing staff were relocated to area teams to share their knowledge and practice and 1.5 permanence managers posts were secured to provide an overview of the services work on its Permanence and Care Excellence (PACE) programme and to provide active advice and assistance to those involved in permanence work within the area teams. The restructured service was augmented with mandatory training in permanence for all children and families' staff, and a quarterly permanence hub which provides appropriate training advice and information and attendance of all social workers at these groups is treated as a priority by managers.

What people told us

Overall adopters spoken to told us that they were very happy with the quality of care and support they received to prepare them for the adoption of the children placed with them. One adopter told us that the entire process, from enquiry to registration, was smooth and efficient. She commented "Our worker was always incredibly professional, and empathic; she made you feel that we were the only people she was dealing with." Another adopter told us "Our preparation training was fantastic. It did exactly what it said on the tin. We couldn't have asked for more."

Adopters told us of the wide range of training and support groups available to them at all stages of the process.

In particular the services pre-school toddler groups were well attended. Adopters told us how much they enjoyed getting to know other adopters while their children played; good connections have been made.

One adopter told us of the "amazing" work done by a member of staff who had offered extensive post adoption support work to herself and her teenage daughter. She commented that both had an increased understanding of each other and her daughter had greatly benefitted from having a "befriender" who she could share her views and concerns with.

While the children we met and interacted with were too young to give their views, we observed that a very high quality of care was afforded to them by adopters who were clearly devoted and committed to meeting their needs.

Self assessment

The service was not asked to provide a self assessment this year but had completed a full annual return which provided comprehensive information and assisted in preparation for this inspection.

From this inspection we graded this service as:

Quality of care and support	5 - Very Good
Quality of staffing	not assessed
Quality of management and leadership	5 - Very Good

What the service does well

Overall, we found that children who were adopted had experienced safe, nurturing care with adopters who felt confident and well prepared for the task. This finding was supported by a range of file checks which confirmed that documentation in relation to the child had been completed to a high standard by children's social workers who had a good knowledge and understanding of the family background and the child's needs.

We spoke to adopters who had participated in Aberdeenshire's concurrency programme, which offered an opportunity for children to move to a foster family who have the potential to go on to adopt, if the child cannot safely return home. We felt that this approach allowed time for a defined number of options to be fully assessed while trauma experienced by the child was significantly reduced due to their having a secure base with minimal disruption. The adopters involved in the concurrency process had successfully adopted two children who had been placed with them from birth and had achieved very good outcomes through this process.

We saw that prospective adopters had regular supervision by their supervising social workers and had access to a range of training and support and groups throughout the adoption process and after placement. Innovative and successful activities included two geographically based, and well attended, toddler groups for adopters and their children and a newly formed support group for those directly involved in adoption.

We felt that the above initiatives had provided good opportunities for adopters to share information and gain confidence in meeting the needs of their adopted children.

From talking to adoptive carers we found that their journey to adoption had been efficient and skilfully carried out by experienced and knowledgeable staff. We found that enquiries had been responded to timeously and that the preparation to adopt course had been informative and enjoyable. One adopter told us "We were so well prepared through our attendance at the "Preparation to Adopt" course. Afterwards they gave us the time and space to reflect on our decision to go ahead. We felt truly respected."

We saw that Form F assessments (the document used to assess prospective adopters) were thorough and well evidenced and that detailed linking, matching and coordination plans had taken place. These findings were further supported by adopters who commented on the skills and knowledge base of the staff team. One adopter told us "The assessment process was challenging but we actually looked forward to our assessor coming out on a Friday afternoon." Another commented "We had an issue with a close relative who found it very difficult to accept our decision to adopt. Our assessor visited her and helped her to see it differently and later encouraged her to attend a training session with me. The change was remarkable. She is now our baby son's Number 1. fan!"

We attended a team meeting and saw that there was a good range of appropriate training available to all staff tailored to their individual needs and that there was good quality discussion in relation to the learning experiences of attendees. Child centred discussions were evident throughout and all staff were highly motivated and encouraged to discuss and promote new ideas and new ways of working.

We felt that this high standard of team work had helped to ensure that staff had the requisite skills and confidence to support adopters achieve good outcomes for children who have experienced significant trauma and loss.

We found that post adoption support plans were detailed and available at matching panel and that the service supported post adoption work with adoptees and their families which included birth family tracing and counselling. Good quality of provision was further ensured through close collaborative work with services such as Birth Link.

Overall, we found a culture of responsive and forward looking leadership within the service. Proactive planning and a focus on continuous improvement were evident in the service's detailed and thoughtful plans including their recently updated Corporate Parenting and Annual Adoption reports.

The service told us that they had experienced a year on year decrease in applications to adopt. We were pleased to hear that due to a concerted recruitment and marketing campaign using social media to promote actively the Council's adoption service, the numbers of applicants has now increased steadily. We felt that this success would help to promote positive outcomes for Aberdeenshire's children who could be secured within their home area, with increased opportunities to maintain contact with their siblings and other members of their birth families.

We spoke with the Agency Decision Maker, an experienced manager who told us that she attended a useful yearly business panel. The fostering and adoption panel was led independently by a chair with extensive experience of adoption and panel members had a range of diverse and relevant experience to carry out their roles and functions including a member with a direct experience of adoption. Adopters spoke to told us that they had found the panels to have been a positive and valuable experience for them.

Adopters were actively encouraged to participate in evaluation through feedback at panel and all training and a summary of the feedback was in place in the team's evidence folder.

From our sample of files we found that staff within the team had regular supervision of good quality and a yearly staff appraisal; all staff spoken to confirmed that they felt supported by an experienced team manager who was accessible and inclusive in her management style. We saw that a new member of staff had a robust induction and had almost completed the reputable and challenging "Securing Children's Futures" Course. She spoke of having "excellent" support from her manager with time being given within her work to allow her to maximise her learning.

We felt that this robust and inclusive system of support by managers had helped to ensure that staff had the skills and confidence to work with adopters to help them provide the best possible outcomes for their children.

What the service could do better

Not all adopters had had wholly positive experiences of the transition service with a reported inconsistency in relation to the role and expectations of the foster carer in the process. We discussed this with the manager who acknowledged the issue raised and agreed that where problems are identified staff and managers need to proactively address this to ensure that the coordination process is as smooth as possible and not unnecessarily prolonged.

Evidence from a wide range of sources, written and verbal, told us of drift and delay in securing children's futures and the concerns and frustrations this had caused all involved. There were a number of views as to the underlying cause but the majority focussed on the increased workload within teams, staff turnover and the pressure of low staffing levels within certain geographical areas.

We were pleased to learn that the service had in place a plan for a significant and robust review of its permanence planning entitled "PACE 2019: Where are we now ?" We were told that this was imminent and would address the impact of change, with additional action plans enacted to redress findings where appropriate.

We felt that such a review was essential to address the significant issues raised in order that poorer outcomes for children can be avoided. We were confident that this would be progressed and led by senior managers within the service and the outcomes will be closely monitored at the next inspection.

We noted that staff files were not routinely audited. We discussed this with the manager who acknowledged the need for this to happen in order to assure quality of recording and management overview and scrutiny of the service provided to adopters and children placed with them. We will look at this at the next inspection.

In keeping with best practice in adoption, we noted that the assessment process should be supported by second opinion visit which would provide an important second level appraisal and quality assurance by a manager, prior to panel. This is not routinely carried out by the manager of the service and we would ask the service to give this matter further thought.

In conclusion, we saw that there were major strengths and clear evidence of a culture of continuous improvement within Aberdeenshire's Adoption Service. We acknowledged the current plans of the service to review permanence and welcome this as essential to provide continuously high quality outcomes for children and adoptive families. We were confident that this would be carried out as discussed with managers of the service. This informed a grade of very good for both care and support and management and leadership at this inspection.

Requirements

Number of requirements: 0

Recommendations

Number of recommendations: 0

Complaints

There have been no complaints upheld since the last inspection. Details of any older upheld complaints are published at www.careinspectorate.com.

What the service has done to meet any requirements we made at or since the last inspection

Previous requirements

There are no outstanding requirements.

What the service has done to meet any recommendations we made at or since the last inspection

Previous recommendations

There are no outstanding recommendations.

Inspection and grading history

Date	Type	Gradings
23 Mar 2017	Announced (short notice)	Care and support 6 - Excellent Environment Not assessed Staffing 6 - Excellent Management and leadership Not assessed
11 Feb 2015	Announced (short notice)	Care and support 4 - Good Environment Not assessed Staffing 5 - Very good Management and leadership 5 - Very good
29 Jan 2014	Announced	Care and support 5 - Very good

Date	Type	Gradings	
		Environment Staffing Management and leadership	Not assessed 5 - Very good 5 - Very good
1 Feb 2013	Announced (short notice)	Care and support Environment Staffing Management and leadership	5 - Very good Not assessed 5 - Very good 5 - Very good
15 Dec 2010	Announced	Care and support Environment Staffing Management and leadership	5 - Very good Not assessed Not assessed Not assessed
18 Mar 2010	Announced	Care and support Environment Staffing Management and leadership	5 - Very good Not assessed 5 - Very good Not assessed
19 Feb 2009	Announced	Care and support Environment Staffing Management and leadership	5 - Very good Not assessed 5 - Very good 4 - Good

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