

Highland Council Adoption Service Adoption Service

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Service provided by:
Highland Council

Service provider number:
SP2003001693

Care service number:
CS2004082039

About the service

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

The Care Inspectorate will award grades for services based on findings of inspections. Grades for this service may change after this inspection if we have to take enforcement action to make the service improve, or if we uphold or partially uphold a complaint that we investigate.

This service was previously registered with the Care Commission and transferred its registration to the Care Inspectorate on 1 April 2011.

Highland Council Adoption Service provides a service for children, young people and their families who were assessed as in need of the service.

The service recruits and supports adoptive parents to provide families for those children who could not live with their birth families or extended family members and whose needs were assessed as best met in an adoptive family.

The service is based in Inverness and was managed by the Fostering and Adoption Manager. Resources on a day-to-day basis were managed by two team managers. All senior staff had considerable experience in both fostering and adoption work. All staff working within the team had a professional social work qualification. The aims and objectives of Highland Council's Adoption Service included:

- The best interests of the child are met.
- To recruit, prepare and inform, assess, approve, train, support, monitor and review a range of prospective adopters to meet the needs of looked after children, and meet the lifelong needs of children when they were adopted.
- To ensure that prospective adopters know what services were available to them and their adopted children, and formalise this in a post adoption agreement meeting.
- To comply with the regulations that govern the Permanency (Adoption) Panel, and work towards the National Care Standards, particularly about lay membership.
- To ensure that delay is minimised by monitoring the permanency process.
- To make decisions about children considering their views and wishes.
- To prepare children for adoption, keep them informed at the different stages, focusing on safety, security and identity.
- To promote, respect and take into account a child's culture, ethnicity, language, religion and any disability when making decisions and to consider the views of parents with regards to this.
- To acknowledge the needs of birth parents in the adoption process, their contribution to the child's future security and identity by offering specific work on the issues that may affect them.

- To ensure that adults affected by adoption have access to information and services which support them in making sense of their history, but ensuring that any adopted child's needs and wishes are central.
- To ensure that children that were adopted are supported in their access to their records and to their birth family.

What people told us

During the course of this inspection we spoke with various people. We spoke with people who were in the process of adopting and people who had adopted. We spoke with link social workers (these are social workers who work in the adoption service) and field social workers (these are social workers who work in the Care and Protection teams).

We gained the views of the permanency panel members.

Prospective adopters and adopters told us that overall they had found the service to be good. However, they also highlighted some areas that they found could have been better. Comments noted included the following:

- We felt the Preparation Course was very helpful. We found the input from people who had adopted children to be invaluable.
- The Preparation Course provided us with factual information but looking back, I think more information should have been provided around the emotional effects and more information about the relationship with the foster carers when completing introductions.
- We had a very good relationship with our social worker who gave us very good support.
- The communication between our child's social worker and our social worker was poor.
- We were disappointed with the timescales from attending the Preparation Course and getting the process started.
- There have been delays.

Link social workers we spoke with told us that they received very good support from their managers. However, they told us that the service previously provided had been affected by a reduction in staffing. Comments noted included the following:

- We are trying to keep up to date with everything but this is very hard at times.
- Due to the lack of staff we are not able to support our carers as well as we used to.
- There have been huge changes within this service following council cuts which resulted in the loss of one-third of our team. Things have been difficult and the hard work of our service manager has to be acknowledged.
- It has been difficult to support our carers the way we would want to due to very restrictive budgets.
- Carers are very understanding and put up with lots of changes to our service.

- Our visits to carers have reduced.
- Duty tasks impact on our getting assessments reports done in time.

However, all of the link social workers we spoke with told us that they "pulled together" as a team and at challenging times they all supported each other.

Care and Protection social workers we spoke with told us that the last two years had been very challenging. Comments noted included the following:

- We know that we are not getting reports in on time to the Permanency Panel and this slows down the whole process of gaining permanency for children. However, we have to prioritise child protection work and this always takes precedence.

Members of the Permanency Panel told us that overall they thought the service was good. However, they highlighted some areas that could be improved on. Comments noted included the following:

- The quality of reports is generally good. Although it is clear that either deadlines or workloads have got in the way.
- The administration support to the panel is excellent. Papers sent out on time to read and minutes and Agency Decision Maker (ADM) approvals are fast tracked when necessary. The administrator, the panel and the ADM are very knowledgeable about all the processes and they are available to support workers in the processes.
- The element of drift is of concern to us.
- We are aware that there are vacancies in some teams and with child protection taking a priority perhaps some social workers feel if children are safe they may think a few weeks delay will be OK, not realising that a few weeks in a young child's life can be too long.
- Cases coming to the panel are more complex and there are more children waiting for adoption than there are families wanting to adopt. The service has been depleted through voluntary redundancies, which has impacted on how many adoptive parents assessments can be done.

Self assessment

We did not request a self assessment in this inspection year.

From this inspection we graded this service as:

Quality of care and support	4 - Good
Quality of staffing	not assessed
Quality of management and leadership	4 - Good

What the service does well

Overall, the service evidenced a good performance in meeting the needs of children, prospective adopters and adopters.

Information was sent out to potential applicants in a speedy way. The service considered this to be an important part of the service to ensure there was no delay in responding to potential adopters.

Preparation courses for prospective adopters were well organised and prospective adopters found these to be of great help. Preparation courses enabled prospective adopters to meet with others going through the process and input from people who had adopted was said to be "invaluable".

Assessment reports for prospective adopters were of a good standard, and showed that applicants had been supported to reflect on their own life experiences and why they wanted to adopt.

The assessment process for prospective adopters was thorough. We were told by prospective adopters and adopters that this was the case. "There were lots of questions for us to answer". "No stone was left unturned during our assessment but this is a good thing".

During the assessment process, prospective adopters were supported very well by their link social worker. "We had lots of visits". "If we had any questions we could speak to our link worker or someone else in the service". "Our social worker was particularly skilled at picking up on any areas they felt we were unclear about".

Members of the permanency panel commented that, in the main, the assessment reports were of a good quality which enabled the panel to make informed and effective recommendations to the Agency Decision Maker (ADM).

The child assessment reports and permanence reports contained relevant information about the child's history and needs.

Various forums were used to consider the potential matching of children with adoptive families. For example, team meetings, managers' meetings, adoption exchange days and adoption activity days.

The service offered a very good post adoption service and other external agencies were used when necessary. Very good links had been established with the primary health care worker and we found that the consultations had been carried out in a speedy way. It was clear from looking at the consultation notes that adopters found this to be a very valuable service in preventing crisis situations occurring.

Highland Council had developed its own system to monitor and review the progress of permanency planning for all children. Monthly senior manager meetings were held to track progress and think of ways in which delays could be managed.

Other quality assurance systems were in place and this included feedback after people attended the permanency panel and took part in training.

Staff spoken with told us that the support they received from the service manager was "just great". Staff also supported each other when faced with challenges and it was clear that they worked well as a team.

Regular supervision took place and monthly staff meetings were held. The service manager placed a high priority on the team meetings as this was a forum where staff could discuss issues and continue to provide support to each other.

What the service could do better

It should be noted that all our areas for improvement had been identified by the senior management team prior to our inspection and a current re-design of the service was being undertaken by senior managers to address these issues.

Although we found that reviews had, in the main been carried out, some were outwith the statutory timescales. Senior managers were aware of this and plan to address this in the near future.

The systems that were in place to monitor and review the progress of permanence planning for all children in need of adoption were good. Senior management had identified that there had been drift and delay in permanence planning for children and ways in which this could be addressed were being considered.

We, along with the service had identified several reasons for this drift and delay and this included:

When the Permanency Panel could not make a recommendation to pursue permanency away from home because all alternatives had not been explored. For example, was Kinship Care an option?

When reports were not submitted on time due to pressure of other work and conflicting priorities. Teams were under increasing pressure with reduced staffing levels affecting priorities, covering duty and other child protection issues taking priority over permanence work.

Incomplete case submissions to the Permanency Panel. There were a number of cases presented to the panel where incomplete or outstanding work needed to be carried out before a recommendation could be made.

A number of cases had been delayed when the Children's Hearing did not agree with the Permanency Plan for children and had asked for additional assessments to be carried out.

It was clear that a reduction in staffing levels within the service had impacted on securing permanency for children. The result was that managers and social workers were faced with the daily, almost impossible task of having to wrestle with their decisions as to what work needed to be prioritised. However, this should not impact on children who require permanency and the service provider needs to address this as a matter of urgency (**see Recommendation 1**).

Requirements

Number of requirements: 0

Recommendations

Number of recommendations: 1

1. The service provider should ensure that permanency plans for children improve to ensure there are better outcomes for children who require permanency away from home.

National Care Standards Adoption Agencies. Standard 23: Completing the Adoption Process.

Complaints

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

Inspection and grading history

Date	Type	Gradings
4 Mar 2016	Announced (short notice)	Care and support 5 - Very good Environment Not assessed Staffing 5 - Very good Management and leadership 6 - Excellent
10 Mar 2015	Announced (short notice)	Care and support 5 - Very good Environment Not assessed Staffing 5 - Very good Management and leadership 5 - Very good
7 Mar 2014	Announced (short notice)	Care and support 5 - Very good Environment Not assessed Staffing 5 - Very good Management and leadership 5 - Very good
11 Jan 2013	Announced	Care and support 5 - Very good Environment Not assessed Staffing 5 - Very good Management and leadership 5 - Very good
14 Oct 2010	Announced	Care and support 5 - Very good Environment Not assessed Staffing Not assessed Management and leadership Not assessed
16 Dec 2009	Announced	Care and support 6 - Excellent Environment Not assessed Staffing 6 - Excellent Management and leadership 6 - Excellent
9 Oct 2008	Announced	Care and support 5 - Very good

Date	Type	Gradings	
		Environment	Not assessed
		Staffing	5 - Very good
		Management and leadership	5 - Very good

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