

Worcestershire County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Sean White
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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 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

Worcestershire Council's adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. It is managed from Wildwood in the County Hall complex and operates from Bridgewater house. It consists of a development team for recruitment and preparation, a county adoption team that does assessments and placement support and a post-adoption team. The duties it undertakes are as follows: the recruitment, preparation assessment and approval of adopters, both domestic and inter-country; the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters; the support of adoption placements; post-adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, including birth records counselling and intermediary work; support to birth parents of children placed for adoption, or who have been adopted.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This agency has a strong approach to keeping children safe and protecting their welfare; this is achieved by a thorough and rigorous approach to recruiting and approving adoptive families. The adoption service works well in partnership with children's social workers in the matching process to achieve realistic permanent placements.

There are effective systems in place to provide on-going support to adoptive families through a dedicated adoption support team. This team, in partnership with the Integrated Service for Looked After Children (ISL), also provides a range of innovative and sophisticated support packages for people who have been affected by adoption.

The agency's work with birth parents is not as well organised as other parts of the adoption process. Although every effort is made to engage with them in the planning for adoption, there are issues surrounding consistency in providing adequate support and developing life-story work.

The agency is well managed across the board and sufficiently staffed by experienced, qualified and knowledgeable workers. The arrangements in place to organise allocations, workloads and support are of a good standard; workers are clearly committed and demonstrated significant skills in adoption matters. Opportunities for training and development are very good. The administrative arrangements were efficient and premises are secure.

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency has made significant strides in recent times. The restructuring of the Council, a new management structure, that has been further augmented this year, have all played a part in developing the service to an overall good standard. The indicators are that there is potential for further improvement.

The agency has improved in all areas following the inspection of three years ago, except in relation to the services provided to birth parents, which were reported as requiring improvement at the time and still do.

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.

The agency has a thorough and robust approach to meeting the needs of children whose plan is for adoption; it is a child-centred agency that has a focused approach to safeguarding the welfare and future wellbeing of children. The structural model of choice of the agency is through having a Development Team, which undertakes recruitment and preparation and a County Adoption Team (CAT) that undertakes assessments and placement support. It was very clear that the adoption service works well in partnership with children's social workers and that management structures support this.

The systems in place to alert the team about children requiring an adoption placement are robust and enable the recruitment of adopters to be undertaken from a fully informed standpoint. The recruitment practices are based on a research and marketing model that is developing a sophisticated approach to targeting the most appropriate people to meet the needs of children. The systems in place to prioritise and 'fast-track' applicants with particular potential enables children with complex circumstances to have greater opportunities for matching at an earlier stage.

The approach to preparation and assessment is, in the main, very thorough. There is a rigorous screening system that involves information evenings and exploratory home visits both before and after preparation groups, undertaken by the Development Team - and a thorough approach to assessment carried out by the CAT. The assessment reports (Forms F) are, overall, of a good standard, which enables the panel to be fully informed when considering its recommendations. There were, however, instances whereby more detail and analysis of complex situations would have provided a fuller picture of the applicants' situations and circumstances. There is a very thorough approach to Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) forms,

statutory checks and reference gathering. All the adopters who provided information for this inspection were happy with the thoroughness of approach by the agency.

Child Permanence Reports (CPRs) are less consistent. There are some good examples, however, and it is understood that the agency is aware of some of the quality issue and lack of consistency and indicated its intentions to improve matters.

The agency's approach to foster carers or second time adopters undertaking preparation training is not as clearly defined as with other applicants and does not demonstrate a consistency in all cases.

The systems in place for identifying the permanence needs of children are of a good standard and avoid delay in most circumstances. The monitoring systems in respect of children placed for adoption - and in respect of referring children to the adoption service are equally of a high standard. The processes for identifying potential adopters, including the sharing of information, is well established and well-organised and the matching, introductions and placement processes are well managed, thorough and rigorous.

The panel is appropriately constituted and independently chaired by a suitably qualified and experienced social worker. There have been no problems with it maintaining a quorum and members are said to be conscientious and full contributors to the proceedings. There are satisfactory procedures in place to govern the activities of the panel but the recruitment of new members is less well managed than it could be in respect of not having a formal competitive recruitment system.

The minutes of the panel are thorough and provide clear evidence of why and how recommendations are made. Decision making is timely and robust and adds a further positive dimension to the quality management of adoption business. Overall, the panel business is well administered.

The agency is managed and staffed by suitably qualified and experienced people. Recruitment practices are robust with all necessary checks being carried out.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency provides regular support to adoptive placements and works well in partnership with children's social workers to encourage and maintain families' journeys through adoption. The family social worker continues to provide support for up to three months after the adoption order is made; after this the responsibility passes to the adoption support team, should continued support be necessary or required. There is a very low disruption rate in this authority.

A dedicated adoption support team is a reasonably recent addition to the service, as is the Integrated Service for Looked After Children (ISL), which has a wide ranging, integrated, responsibility across education, health and social care services. Together,

these provide for a sophisticated and innovative approach to supporting adoptive families and indicators showed that it is having an increasingly positive impact across the board. Adoption support and ISL work closely together and the range of specialisms available enables appropriate input to be sourced and deployed where necessary or required.

Access to medical and legal advice was of a good standard and it was repeatedly reported that the quality of the advice provided was of a very high standard.

Cases were noted where significant input had been employed to enable adoptive families deal with complex and distressing situations and feedback from these families praised the skills and efforts of agency staff very highly.

The approach to adoption support is thorough and entails full assessments of need with appropriate support packages put in place to meet those needs.

There is a range of post approval and post adoption training opportunities that have been arranged and made available (on attachment and challenging behaviour, for instance) and an adopters' support group has been influential in promoting these.

There are also other events and activities throughout the year that enhance the overall support networks available to adoptive parents and their children.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency demonstrated that it makes efforts to engage birth parents in the adoption planning process for their children and their views, when given, were clearly recorded. The Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) make sure that the involvement of parents is encouraged throughout the reviewing and planning processes.

There is no clear strategy for working with and supporting birth parents. Support for birth parents is provided by the agency, but the arrangements are not very well managed making the delivery of such services somewhat inconsistent. Although the arrangements for birth parent support includes having access to support independent of their child's social worker, they did not have any coherence and it is confusing how the opportunities for independent support are promoted or accessed.

Life-story work and the production of later-life letters is a developing aspect of the agency that, although enabled by dedicated workers who concentrate on this issue and assist social workers in their responsibilities, is still inconsistent across the board.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency has a clearly written Statement of Purpose that outlines the aims and objectives of the service and there is a range of up to date policies and procedures that underpin the strategic and operational practices.

The services offered by the agency are well presented in the adopters' information pack, which also includes a DVD. This is a very welcoming pack that adopters said was useful in informing them of what Worcester offered, and what they could expect.

The management team, at all levels of the organisation, demonstrated strong leadership, commitment to the best outcomes for children and a supportive and encouraging outlook. Workers said that they felt the organisation, through its managers, provided them with direction, support and enabled them to develop professionally. Managers are from a range of professional backgrounds and were appropriately experienced and qualified.

The management structure, which is reasonably recent, has been strengthened by the addition of an operational manager. This has clearly had a positive impact in developing practice and strategic direction. It is clear that communication and interaction across the management structure is well defined and enables the different participants in the adoption programme to work as 'seamlessly' as possible. Overall, the agency and its services are well managed, processes were efficient and strategic direction well considered.

Operational management, including supervision and staff support, is well coordinated. Allocation and workload management is undertaken with care and sensitivity. The training and development opportunities for workers are very good, which include external and specialist subject courses, and it was clear that staff took advantage of these whenever it was appropriate or necessary to further their knowledge and skills; there is a high proportion of workers with Post Qualifying Awards. New workers undergo a well coordinated and structured induction programme.

There is a conscientious overview of the service taken by the executive, which receives regular reports and management information from the agency to keep it up to date with the service.

The administrative arrangements are well managed and there is adequate support

for the service from workers who have an efficient and well-organised approach.

Case records are generally well maintained and include most of the required material; there was an inconsistent approach, however, to the recording of supervision decisions and there was little evidence of records being routinely audited. The records in respect of agency staff and adoption panel members were well maintained and included all required information.

The premises from where the adoption service operates - which are new to the service - are located on the outskirts of the city. They are not particularly accessible, although there is public transport nearby; parking, for instance, is very limited, which is also an issue for workers. The limitations on space in the premises has led to an arrangement whereby workers do not have their own desk; vacant desks can be used by everyone but it was said that, at times, there are only limited spaces available. This was an area of discontent amongst workers but there was no evidence that it adversely affected the operations of the service.

Security of records, including archives was well maintained, and the Council is launching a disaster recovery plan.

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):

- develop a consistent approach to the production of Child Permanence Reports. NMS 5.
- develop a more coherent approach to preparation training for foster carers who wish to adopt and for second time adopters. NMS 4.
- develop a formal system for recruiting members to the adoption panel, particularly the independent members. NMS 10.
- develop a more coherent approach to working with birth families. NMS 9.
- develop a more consistent approach to the preparation of life-story work. NMS 8.
- develop a consistent system of recording supervision decisions on adopters' case files. NMS 25.