

Cambridgeshire County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Rosemary Chapman / Rosemary Dancer
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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

Cambridgeshire County Council's adoption service is part of the Office of Children and Young People and is managed by the County Manager, Fostering and Adoption. The service consists of an adoption team, a family finding team and an adoption support team, each with a team manager. It undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include: the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters; 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, and support to birth parents of children placed for adoption or who have been adopted. The council have a contract with PACT (a registered voluntary adoption agency) to provide a service for the preparation and assessment of people who wish to adopt from overseas.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The preparation and assessment of prospective adopters is thorough and has been updated to reflect the requirements of recent guidance. The matching of children to adoptive families is good; most children are placed locally and very few wait a long time for a suitable placement. The adoption panel is rigorous yet welcoming; it retains its independence from the agency whilst maintaining good working relationships which enable constructive feedback to take place. The agency decision is made in a timely and thoughtful way.

The agency provides a variety of effective support to adoptive families, which includes quick and easy access to a clinical psychologist, educational support and medical advice. The agency runs a number of groups and provides training and direct work with families.

The agency provides an independent worker for birth families and this includes the provision of support groups. The agency also undertakes birth records counselling and intermediary work in a sensitive and supportive manner. Some aspects of work with birth families is inconsistent, however. This includes the provision of life story books in a timely way and information written in child permanence reports (CPR).

The agency is well managed at all levels. Staff are experienced, qualified, committed and enthusiastic; this is augmented by regular supervision and opportunities for training which facilitates the provision of an effective service for children, adopters and birth families.

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency has made a number of significant improvements, which include improved staffing levels and the reorganisation of the adoption team. A family finding team has been established to find placements for children with more complex needs, a specialist training post has been developed to undertake the preparation training and post approval training needs of adopters and the adoption support team is now fully operational. This has led to the service being provided in a more efficient and effective manner. The agency has addressed all recommendations made at the previous inspection; however although improvements have been made in relation to personnel, panel members' and children's files, they are still not fully compliant with the regulations.

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 written recruitment strategy which highlights the methods and campaigns used to advertise for adopters. There is a steady flow of potential applicants, who are, in the main, white British. The agency established the family finding team to address the placement of children who have more complex needs and this is working successfully. However, the agency also has plans to undertake more targeted recruitment to offer a more diverse range of adopters and thus more placement choice.

There is a thorough and well established matching process for children which is being developed further to include the use of the psychologist who is attached to the adoption team. There is evidence to show that children are placed with families who meet their cultural and religious needs and that children are placed with their siblings wherever possible. However, it is not always clear in the case recording how and why that decision was reached and there was also evidence of delay in changing a plan to place siblings together.

There is a thorough and well documented process for the preparation, assessment and approval of adopters. Interested people attend an information session, which is followed by an initial interview if they are still keen to pursue an application. They are then invited to make a formal application for assessment. The agency has updated and changed the delivery of the preparation training in the last 18 months and the feedback from adopters is good. Comments included: 'brilliant', 'realistic information given', 'I felt valued and respected'. The preparation training is now organised by a social worker who is appointed to a specific training post and she is

able to provide a consistent overview of how it is received and monitor and evaluate this on a regular basis.

The assessments of prospective adopters are of a good quality and address competencies. A second opinion visit is undertaken as a matter of course and all appropriate checks and references are made. The social worker completes a health and safety questionnaire but this does not include gun ownership, dangerous or ceremonial weapons, poisonous plants or hanging cords.

Once adopters are approved the agency sends out a post approval pack of information. Once a match has been identified, adopters receive all the information about the child including the opportunity to meet with other professionals and foster carers. The agency does not hold life appreciation days as a general rule although this has been the case on a small number of occasions.

The adoption panel has a clear written set of policies and procedures which govern its function and operation. There is a well established practice of adopters being invited to attend the panel both for approval and matching. Both the observation of the panel and comments from adopters suggest that this works well and attendees are made welcome and put at ease. This does not detract from the rigour of the panel however.

The panel is well constructed with a good mix of members reflecting both personal and professional experience. New panel members undertake a planned induction which includes observing a panel and discussions with the professional adviser and panel chair. A range of training opportunities, including training with staff from the agency, are available. Panels are well organised, their frequency is such that panel business is not delayed and the minutes give a good account of the proceedings.

There is a thorough and timely process for making the agency decision and the letters notifying the approved adopters of this are personalised. However, there was no evidence in any of the files inspected of the notification letters which must be sent to birth parents notifying them of the decision to place their child for adoption, or of the proposed match.

The manager and staff of the agency are appropriately checked prior to being employed. However, the recruitment files did not show evidence of the telephone verification of references and internal applicants need to supply only one reference. All staff are appropriately qualified, skilled and experienced.

The agency has written local safeguarding procedures which have been developed in collaboration with three other neighbouring local authorities. However, these do not specifically refer to children placed for adoption or receiving adoption support services, give details of how referrers can contact Ofsted if they wish to do so or what action to take if children are placed in another local authority. There are no written procedures for dealing with historical abuse.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency has significantly developed its adoption support services in the last 18 months and this now provides effective support to adopters both pre and post adoption order. Of particular note is the post of psychologist who provides full time support to the adoption service. This input is valued by social workers and adopters alike. She provides consultation to staff, consultation and direct work with families, will co-work with social workers and is able to respond quickly and at an early stage. She is also involved in training, both on the preparation course and post approval training on attachment and behaviour management. There is also support available for educational needs via the Educational Support for Looked After Children (ESLAC) worker, which is flexible and of particular benefit when children are placed out of county.

Families are also supported by their allocated social workers up to the point of adoption order and one adopter described the social worker as 'my rock'. Families are aware of the duty of local authorities to provide support and aware of what is available; this includes training, support groups, behaviour management groups, direct work with families and financial support.

The agency has access to medical and legal advice, which staff say is accessible and helpful. The former medical adviser has also developed systems to ensure that medical information about children placed for adoption is not lost on placement or when their surname is changed.

The agency has developed systems to look at any disruptions of adoption placements and learn from them. This includes the post of disruptions manager, ensuring the adoption panel receives information from the disruption meeting and providing support to the adopters and child.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency demonstrates a sound awareness of the lifelong implications of adoption, the importance of maintaining a child's heritage and enabling birth families to play a part in this. The quality of CPRs is variable; some social workers have made every effort to record the wishes and feelings of birth parents but others are very limited. Social workers are aware of the importance of this and express a wish for further training.

Birth parents have access to a support worker who is independent of the child's social worker. Current arrangements for referral to this service are inconsistent. The agency also run two support groups for birth mothers and offers individual support for birth fathers.

Birth parents are encouraged to contribute to maintaining their child's heritage. The agency facilitates a one-off meeting between the birth parents and the adoptive family and it was clear that adopters realise the importance of this and genuinely want to be involved. There is also a commitment to provide a life story book for the child; however, these are not always provided in a timely way, and in one instance, adopters did not receive this until after the child was adopted. This is unacceptable practice.

The agency has a well established post box system in place to facilitate indirect contact. This includes written guidance and personal assistance with letter writing if required.

The agency offers birth records counselling and intermediary work for adult adoptees and birth parents. This is sensitively handled and the evidence seen demonstrates that everyone is treated with respect and dignity. The agency has a variety of leaflets available which outline the services available and the other agencies which can also offer advice and support.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The Statement of Purpose meets the legislative requirements and is available to staff and any interested parties. The Children's Guide is a user-friendly booklet but the version seen did not include the contact details of the Children's Rights Director or how to access independent advocacy.

Prospective applicants receive plenty of written information prior to deciding whether to continue with their application to adopt and said they found it 'really informative'. There is a programme of regular information sessions which include listening to excerpts from a DVD which adopters have made to provide 'user focussed' information.

The adoption agency is well managed at all levels. Managers are appropriately qualified, skilled, knowledgeable and experienced and provide good leadership. There are well defined roles and responsibilities with clear systems of delegation. A variety of monitoring systems are in place which include reports to the executive, a number of tracking systems, feedback and reports to the adoption panel and regular supervision. Staff receive regular supervision which is of a good quality and effective.

Staffing levels have improved significantly since the last inspection and both administrative support and social work staffing levels appear to meet the needs of

the service. Staff are well supported by a variety of employment policies and procedures and access to a good level of training, which lead to staff seeing Cambridgeshire as a reasonable employer.

The files which are maintained on adopters are well ordered, contain good and detailed recording, clearly show decisions made in supervision and file audits. Some documents are not signed or dated however. The adoption files for children do not meet the requirements of the regulations as some significant documents are missing, for example, medical information on birth parents, notifications, court orders, panel minutes; neither do they start at the point when adoption was identified as the plan.

The agency has policies and procedures in place which address data protection, case recording, access to records, storage and retention. The archive storage has been risk assessed in relation to minimising the risk of damage from fire and water. Current information is stored in such a way to ensure confidentiality and security.

The personnel files do not give evidence of telephone verification and this has been addressed under the outcome of staying safe. Panel members' files are well ordered but there were no references in place for the three newest panel members or proof of qualifications for the professional panel members.

The premises used by the adoption agency are accessible, easily identifiable and appropriate. There is a business continuity plan in place which addresses the safeguarding of records and provision of premises.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
13	ensure that notifications of the agency decision in relation to the proposed placement for adoption and of the match are sent to birth parents and placed on the child's adoption file (Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 Regulation 12 (1)(d), Regulation 19(3), Regulation 33 (3)(b))	29/02/2008
24	ensure that the safeguarding procedures comply with Regulation 9 (Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003)	29/02/2008
1	ensure the Children's Guide complies with Schedule 2 (Regulation 3 Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003)	29/02/2008
25	ensure that children's adoption case files comply with Regulation	29/02/2008

	12 (Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 Regulation 12(1))	
28	ensure that panel members' files contain all the required documentation in schedule 3 and 4 (Regulation 11 Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003).	29/02/2008

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure that the case file gives clear documented evidence about decision making in sibling placements and that changes of such plans are dealt with in a timely manner (National Minimum Standard 2)
- develop the health and safety questionnaire to include the missing areas detailed in the report (National Minimum Standard 4)
- consider holding life appreciation days, particularly when making placements of older children (National Minimum Standard 5)
- ensure that there is evidence of telephone verification of references on the employment file and take up two references on internal applicants (National Minimum Standard 19)
- ensure that CPRs are of a consistently good quality and include the wishes and feelings of birth parents (National Minimum Standard 7)
- develop consistent systems to refer birth parents to the independent service (National Minimum Standard 7)
- ensure that life story work and the life story book is undertaken and provided in a timely way (National Minimum Standard 8)
- ensure that all documents in case files are signed and dated (National Minimum Standard 25).