

Norfolk County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Rosemary Chapman / Vivien Slyfield
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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

Norfolk County Council's adoption service is managed by the Head of Adoption and Fostering, Corporate Parenting Sector, based in the Children's Services Department. The Adoption and Family Finding Unit, known as AFFU, consists of three social work teams, each with a team manager. These teams provide services to children, adopters and adoption support. Planning for children takes place in the child care area teams. The agency 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; support to birth parents of children placed for adoption or who have been adopted. It also undertakes assessments of applicants who wish to adopt from overseas and step parent adoptions.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The agency has robust and thorough procedures for assessing adoptive families and is very good at family finding and matching children. The panel processes are well organised, professional and thoughtful.

The agency provides a variety of support to adoptive families and is thorough in the assessment and provision of support to meet a range of identified needs, adopting a long term commitment to supporting families and children.

The agency is committed to involving birth parents in the plans for their children and obtains as much information as possible to inform the life story work. There is a robust letterbox system and assistance with contact, both direct and indirect. It provides access to independent support and also offers a counselling and intermediary service to adopted adults and birth relatives who wish to trace.

The agency is well managed and has a good strategic approach to the provision of adoption services. Staff are well supported and undertake relevant training. This is further enhanced by good administrative systems. There are some shortfalls in record keeping and documentation, however.

Improvements since the last inspection

The report from the previous inspection detailed three actions and 11 recommendations. One action in relation to the panel members' files remains

outstanding but all the recommendations have been addressed. The agency has adopted a more focused approach to the approval of adopters to meet the needs of older children, children with specific needs and sibling groups by providing families within Norfolk. The appointment of a specific panel adviser has been beneficial in developing this role in relation to training, appraisals, quality assurance and liaison with the child care area teams. Adoption support has been further developed to provide what has been judged as an outstanding outcome in this inspection. The agency has invested in staff training, particularly in relation to therapeutic work, such as Theraplay, to support families and children without delay. They have also established a birth relative and adopted adult intermediary service. These improvements have been achieved through increased staffing levels as well as commitment by the managers of the agency and the County Council, to continue to develop the adoption service and provide positive outcomes for children through permanency.

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 clear and well thought out recruitment strategy and a sound awareness of the children who are likely to need adoptive families. There is a strong commitment to family finding, including children who have specific needs and who may be harder to place. Although most children are placed within Norfolk, families from other agencies are used to meet the needs of children if they cannot be met 'in-house'. Children's wishes and feelings are explored and direct work is undertaken with them. A clear sibling assessment takes place before a decision is made to place children together or apart and a psychologist can be involved in this and also in decisions about contact. Any decision about a child's placement is not made lightly and is part of a well thought out, professional process.

The agency has a thorough and formal process for the preparation, assessment and approval of adopters, although the application is currently taken after the preparation course. The preparation course is thorough and adopters spoke very positively about it, saying it is thought provoking and helped them alter their thinking. The assessments are very robust and analytical, second opinion visits are routinely undertaken and a good range of references are sought, including other local authorities and other countries. The health and safety questionnaire did not make reference to dangerous weapons, poisonous plants or hanging cords. Adopters spoke very highly of their assessing social workers, describing them as very professional, reliable and sensitive.

The agency makes good matches and the process is well thought out, professional

and thorough. Child appreciation meetings are well established; these enable prospective adopters to speak to a range of people who have first hand knowledge of the child. They also meet the medical adviser and are provided with a lot of written information. Children's social workers feel supported in the decision making and see it as a professional and joint process. Some foster carers are specifically trained and supported in providing bridging placements and enabling children to move on, which is very good practice and provides invaluable expertise in making the transition as smooth as possible.

The panel process is extremely professional and thorough. The panel has a range of appropriate policies and procedures which underpin its functioning. There is a well-established practice of applicants and prospective adopters attending panel both for approval and matching and although daunting, virtually all applicants said they were well prepared and made to feel welcome and put at their ease. The two panels are properly constituted, although the agency wants to improve the diversity, and have a range of members with appropriate personal and professional experience of adoption and the independent chair is extremely knowledgeable, sensitive and professional. Panel members are offered appropriate training, have access to a counsellor, and new panel members have an induction which includes observation of the panel prior to sitting. Panel members are well prepared, thoughtful and thorough in their deliberations.

Panels are well organised and sit frequently to ensure there is not a delay for children. The minutes are full and give a good account of the discussion and the reasons. The agency decision is made in a considered manner and the verbal communication of this is timely but the written notification is not always within the timescales. The wording of the letter, although personalised, does not reflect the fact that the agency has made the decision, rather than ratified a recommendation.

All the staff and the nominated manager have up to date Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks and are appropriately qualified and experienced. They have access to a range of relevant training and are suitable to work with children and families.

There are procedures in relation to allegations against carers/prospective adopters which relate to children placed for adoption. However, the general safeguarding procedures do not make specific reference to children who are placed for adoption or receiving adoption support services and do not make clear how to contact Ofsted or how to refer to other local authorities if the child lives in another area. There are no procedures in place which relate to historical abuse.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The agency takes its responsibilities for preparing adopters to care for children placed with them very seriously and demonstrated that adopters are well prepared and have a clear understanding of the likely needs of looked after children. The well established practice of child appreciation meetings plays a significant part in this

process. It is also committed to provide a range of support to maintain children in their adoptive families and the extremely low disruption rate (no disruptions in the last four years) is testament to the preparation and support given. One adopter commented that the only reason the placement had not broken down was due to the support they had been given.

Assessments for adoption support are very thorough and well thought out and take a long term view of the needs of the child and the family. They are shared with the family and reviewed. A variety of support is available. This includes membership of Adoption UK, support groups, social events, workshops, buddy scheme, respite care, Theraplay, direct work with children, family support and work with schools. The agency has access to a child psychiatrist who will provide consultation and facilitate access to appropriate services. There is consistency and flexibility and adopters express confidence that their support needs will be met.

The medical advisers meet with prospective adopters prior to the point of the proposed placement and offer regular consultation to staff. Legal advice is also available to the adoption panel and to staff.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The agency demonstrates a strong commitment to working with birth families in order to involve them in the process of planning and providing information for the future. This includes members of the extended family, who are included, treated with sensitivity and kept informed. The agency puts a lot of effort into tracing birth parents if they cannot be found and the child permanence reports (CPR) contain evidence that the wishes and feelings of birth parents are sought and documented. Birth parents are also encouraged to contribute to the CPR themselves.

The agency demonstrates a commitment to improving the quality and consistency of CPRs, recognising their importance in terms of a being a document for helping place the child with suitable adopters, information giving and for the child in later life. Part of this commitment is demonstrated by the efforts the agency are making to assist the placing social workers with this task, through providing examples, offering advice and being available for consultation. The adoption panel are also involved in this by highlighting shortfalls and developing a systematic approach to ensuring corrections are made.

The agency has a service level agreement with a voluntary adoption agency which offers independent support and counselling to birth families.

The agency encourages birth families to contribute to their child's heritage and there was clear evidence that this is given a high priority. There is a commitment to providing life story books and later in life letters at an early stage although there is evidence that this is sometimes delayed. The AFFU makes every effort to facilitate this by offering support and guidance and in some instances, will undertake the work

themselves. This can be some time after the adoption order is made as a way of addressing unresolved issues and providing post adoption support to children and families. The life story books and later in life letters which were seen as part of the inspection were excellent.

The agency has a robust letter box system with a large number of contacts and demonstrates a commitment to providing a high quality service. A small team has been developed to undertake this and ensure it works efficiently and effectively. Contact agreements are clear and staff meet with birth families and foster carers to agree the arrangements. Staff in the team will also assist with letter writing and provide support for direct contacts. Contact arrangements are reassessed and there is flexibility to alter agreements to suit the changing circumstances and needs of the child.

The agency demonstrates a life long commitment to all those involved in the adoption process. It has developed a birth relatives intermediary service to assist birth relatives in contact and tracing, should this be the wish of the adopted person. It has developed clear procedures and staff express a sensitive and committed approach to ensuring the welfare of all parties is promoted. Adopted adults are also offered birth records counselling and enabled to trace their birth families, with the option of a social worker acting as an intermediary and providing support.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The statement of purpose is well written, thorough and has recently been reviewed by the executive. This is underpinned by a comprehensive set of policies and procedures which give clear guidance to staff in relation to the agency's duties and responsibilities towards children. The children's guide is extremely good; it is child focussed, interactive and is used as a working tool to enable children to move on. The agency has worked hard and imaginatively, with care and consideration, to ensure the requirements in relation to the contents of the guide are met in an appropriate and accessible manner. Applicants receive good, clear written information at various stages of the process which enables them to be aware of what should happen next. Adopters commented that this was useful and they were clear about the children who need adoptive families.

The agency is well managed at all levels. There is an effective, strategic approach to improving outcomes for children which is supported by the operational activities. The management team have appropriate skills, qualifications, knowledge and experience and this is backed up by enthusiasm and commitment to the work of the agency and

outcomes for children. There are clear lines of accountability and good communication, both between the management team and the staff group. The executive is committed and kept informed of the agency's activities through written reports and monitoring systems.

The agency has an appropriate number and range of staff to enable the service to run according to its statement of purpose. Staff demonstrate significant levels of knowledge, skill and experience of working with children and in adoption. Although they are organised into three functional teams, they work across the team boundaries to enable them to maintain a broad perspective of the whole adoption spectrum and use their learning from this to inform their practice. They are well supported in their work through regular supervision and support to undertake training. However, updated child protection training had not been undertaken recently by all staff. Although they are busy and under pressure, they feel that Norfolk is a good employer because of the support they receive.

There are sufficient administrative staff to support the work of the service; other staff commented that they were 'invaluable', 'fantastic' and 'we'd be lost without them'. Their skills are well utilised to provide a good quality of written and other materials and they are part of the team.

Case records are generally well maintained but in a few instances, actions highlighted by file audit had not been undertaken, some case reports were not signed and photographs were not dated. The file audit system does not appear to be formalised. There are clear written procedures in place which relate to recording and access to records. Storage of records, including the archive arrangements, are generally appropriate but one team's case records are not kept in a lockable room.

The panel members' files do not comply with the requirements of the regulations. They do not contain all the required information, for example, references, proof of qualifications, photographs, home contact details, CVs. Not all personnel files contain two references and application forms do not ask for month of employment, only years.

The premises are fit for purpose and well located, although it is unfortunate that the current arrangements do not allow all staff to be located in the same building. The IT systems are secure and there is a good business continuity plan in place.

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
24	ensure the child protection procedures comply with Regulation 9 and include historical abuse (Local Authority Adoption Service (England)(Amendment) Regulations 2005)	31/03/2008
28	ensure that personnel and panel members' files comply with Schedule 3 and 4 (Regulation 11, Local Authority Adoption Service (England)(Amendment) Regulations 2005).	31/03/2008

Recommendations

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

- take the application for assessment of adopters prior to the preparation course (National Minimum Standard 4)
- develop the health and safety questionnaire to include poisonous plants, dangerous or ceremonial weapons and hanging cords (National Minimum Standard 4)
- ensure the written notification of the agency decision is made within the timescales of the guidance and makes it clear that the agency has made a decision, rather than ratified a recommendation (National Minimum Standard 13)
- ensure all staff receive child protection training (National Minimum Standards 23 and 32)
- develop a more formalised approach to file audit to ensure shortfalls are rectified (National Minimum Standard 27)
- ensure that all case records are kept in a lockable room (National Minimum Standard 29).