

Luton Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Rosemary Dancer / 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

The agency undertakes, or makes arrangements for, all statutory adoption work with children and those affected by adoption. This includes the recruitment, preparation assessment and approval of domestic adopters and those who wish to adopt a child from overseas; the latter is through an arrangement with a voluntary adoption agency. Adoption support services are arranged, in the main, through a service level agreement with an adoption support agency.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The agency is committed to achieving good outcomes for children. The preparation of adopters is thorough and while there are some gaps in some areas of the assessment work, overall work in this area is satisfactory. The panel demonstrates a very child-centred approach to its work and contributes to ensuring that good outcomes for children are achieved. The medical adviser is proactive in seeking out and sharing crucial medical information with adopters to ensure that health needs can be met. The matching processes are sound and ensure that children are appropriately placed. The good working relationships between the social workers involved support these processes and the early placement stages.

The services in relation to support to adoptive placements are satisfactory but could be better co-ordinated and monitored in terms of the outcomes achieved.

Work with birth parents is well meaning and social workers showed a commitment to supporting birth parents to be involved in the planning for their children's futures. Independent support is available to birth parents but only at a very late stage. This service is not well co-ordinated or monitored in terms of the outcomes achieved. Life story work with children is often not completed in a timely way.

Although there are some shortfalls identified, overall the management of the agency is of a good quality. The management team lead the social work staff in an open and supportive style of management, shortfalls are identified and addressed and there is a strong shown commitment to improvement in the services provided. Managers are fully committed in ensuring staff are well supported and properly trained to carry out their respective roles and there are clear lines of accountability and good levels of communication across the agency. The management, staff and panel demonstrated that in adoption work in Luton a sound child-centred approach is taken.

Improvements since the last inspection

Following the last key inspection there were eight actions and 11 recommendations made in the report. Most of these issues have been satisfactorily addressed. There have been improvements in the recruitment processes for permanent members of staff and for panel members. A number of the policy and procedural documents noted as needing development have been worked on. The uncertain management arrangements at the time of the last inspection have been secured and a sound management structure is in place. However, there are three matters that need further attention. These include: the stage at which an adoption file is commenced, the appointment of a staff member to the administration team vacancy and securing the room the adoption files are stored in.

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 plan to recruit adopters to meet the needs of children waiting for an adoptive placement. Few Luton children are placed with people living within the Luton area due to the need for protecting the anonymity of placements. The agency uses a reciprocal agreement with the consortium members which means that children can be safely placed out of the Luton area. The agency also uses the national adoption register to further widen the placement choice.

There are formal processes in place in respect to the assessment, preparation and approval of prospective adopters. The agency's response to applicants initial contacts with the agency are timely and written information about the adoption process is provided to applicants at this stage. Initial assessment visits to applicants are carried out. Not all of the reports of these visits provide clear evidence about the viability of investing time in progressing the application.

There are two preparation courses held annually and an option for applicants to attend another consortium member course if this is more convenient or if this prevents delay. All of the Luton social workers take part in the Luton preparation courses and this provides the applicants who attend the Luton courses with an opportunity to meet their assessing social worker before the home study assessments commence. The courses are comprehensive and fully inform applicants about the adoption process and the sometimes complex needs of children requiring an adoptive placement.

The quality of the assessments of adopters is variable. Some assessments are evidentially based and analytical. These assessments provide a clear view about the

applicants suitability to adopt, strengths are clearly documented and any areas for development are highlighted. Other assessment reports are overly dependant on applicants descriptive accounts of their life histories. These assessments provide little evidence that important information has been explored with the applicants. They do not provide a clear view about the suitability of the applicants to take on the lifelong and often challenging task of adoption. Second opinion visits are carried out but some of these reports are perfunctory and do not evidence that gaps in assessments have been explored.

The agency has effective matching processes in place and works hard to place children with adopters who will be best able to meet their assessed needs. There are good links between the adoption and childcare teams and the workers work closely together to ensure good matches are made and placements are maintained. Where children are able to express their views these are sought and acted upon where appropriate. Children are informed about the adopters with whom it is planned they will be placed via a range of different media.

The panel processes are underpinned by clear policy and procedures. The panel takes a well considered approach to its work and is well chaired by a professional with considerable experience in adoption matters. The members of panel demonstrate a sound understanding about their respective roles and responsibilities and it is clear that a child-focused approach is taken to the work of the panel. Adopters are invited to attend the panel at which their application is being heard and this is dealt with by the chair and panel members in a sensitive way. Panel dates are set well in advance and the frequency is geared to ensure that delays are kept to a minimum.

Recent internal reorganisation has meant that the panel constitution is not appropriate. In addition to this the adviser to the panel is one of the adoption team managers; this situation can cause issues around conflicts of interest. The panel recommended approval of one set of applicants as suitable to adopt a specific child. This is operating beyond the remit of an adoption panel.

The administration of the panel is overall efficient, the agenda is drawn up in advance and the papers are sent out to members well in advance of the meeting. Minutes are taken and are made available to feed into the decision making process. The decision making process is made without delay and with all information surrounding the case having been considered. There are efficient systems in place to convey the decision to all appropriate people.

The manager is a suitable person to manage the agency and has a satisfactory criminal records bureau check. The recruitment policy does not make it explicit that references should be verified by phone although recent practice in this area shows that this is an expectation within the adoption agency. A robust recruitment process takes place for staff and panel members. The agency practice in respect to the recruitment of agency staff is reliant on assurance from the agency that all checks and balances have been carried out.

The agency uses 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, or 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 satisfactory.

There is an adoption support policy and procedure in place. The majority of the support to adoptive families is delegated to a registered adoption support agency via a formal contract for services. The contract for services is very thorough and detailed and the agency reviews the services provided in terms of value for money. However, the review does not include identifying the quality of the outcomes achieved.

The agency provides some services directly to adoptive families. Adoption support plans are devised in each case. The agency provides some support services directly. These include, means tested financial support to adopters, continued support from the adoption social worker until an order has been made, support and information to families to enable cultural needs to be met and an annual fun day which adopters and children say they enjoy. The systems for paying the financial support are not always efficient.

The agency has good access to legal and medical advice. The medical adviser is proactive in ensuring all available medical information is obtained, assessed and discussed with adopters. The agency also has good access to an educational adviser who is proactive in ensuring a smooth transition between schools where a school move is required. The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service carries out some assessment work to inform the placement of siblings and the planning of future contact needs.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency recognises the lifelong implications of adoption and shows a commitment to trying to work with parents in the planning for their child. Birth parents' wishes and feelings are sought and where obtained recorded and parents can read the assessment reports which are to be presented to the panel. The majority of direct support in terms of a counselling service for birth parents is delegated to a registered adoption support agency via a formal contract for services. However, the late stage of referral for this service, following a full care order having been granted, does not provide birth parents with access to support in a timely way. The work carried out by the support agency is monitored in terms of value for money but is not looked at in terms of the quality of the outcomes.

The quality and approach to life-story work and preparing information about the child, and his birth family's history is variable. This work is key to helping the child to better understand his situation. In some cases the work is delayed due to the social worker not having the capacity in terms of time to carry out this work. There were however some good examples of this work noted where foster carers had been active in gathering information and memoirs for inclusion in memory boxes.

The agency operates an indirect contact system which allows adopted children and birth family members to periodically share information.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The work of the agency is underpinned by a Statement of Purpose and supported by a range of policies and procedures. Written information is provided to children about adoption via two children's guides, one for young or less able children and one for the older or more able age range. Written information about adoption is also provided to adopters. All information can be provided in a range of languages and different media to ensure that the services are accessible to all.

The managers of the agency are suitably qualified and experienced in adoption matters. The agency is well managed at operational and strategic levels. Social workers expressed a confidence in their managers describing them as supportive, approachable and accessible and the lines of accountability are well defined. One social worker stated that, 'support is exceptionally good'.

Overall the agency is effectively monitored and controlled at a strategic level and the executive takes an active approach in overseeing the work of the agency. At an operational level most aspects of the adoption work are subject to a satisfactory level of scrutiny but the outcomes of the support services which are contracted to external provider are not.

Social workers working for the agency are qualified, experienced, and are well-supported in carrying out their roles. Workload management systems are effective as is the support provided via supervision, appraisals and team meetings. Adopters comments overall were positive about their individual workers and the adoption team as a whole. Good working relationships between the adoption and fieldwork teams provide children with a good streamlined service. Workers are encouraged and enabled to develop their professional knowledge and skills through the good training opportunities offered to them. Effective staff recruitment and retention policies are in place. Administrative support to the adoption team is limited at the present time due

a vacant post.

There is a case recording policy in place but no guidance about how files should be ordered. The arrangements for case file maintenance are in the process of changing to an electronic system. The paper files for adopters and children viewed did not evidence that a file audit system is in place nor provide evidence of supervisors decision making. In addition not all files contained contemporaneous notes of assessment visits. Adoption files for children are not made up at the time permanency has been identified as the plan for the child and the contents of these files do not contain all required information in every case. There are written procedures in place in respect to access to records and these include the retrieval of files held in the archiving facility.

The agency maintains separate records for workers and panel members and with the exception of the employment of agency workers these records evidence that in each case a robust recruitment process has taken place.

The premises used by the agency are centrally located, are accessible and provide a reasonable working environment for staff. There are adequate arrangements for the security of the premises although the rooms that contain adoption files are not routinely locked. There are adequate arrangements in practice in respect to the security of the information technology (IT) systems, however, the Business Continuity Plan but does not make explicit reference to the safeguarding/back up of records.

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
1	ensure the child protection procedures comply with Regulation 9 and include historical abuse (Local Authority Adoption Service (England)(Amendment) Regulations 2005)	01/04/2008
25	commence adoption files for children when adoption has been identified as a potential plan and ensure that files are kept up to date throughout the process. (The Adoption Agency Regulations 2005 Regulation 12)	28/03/2008

Recommendations

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

- develop the health and safety questionnaire (National Minimum Standard 4)
- develop formal systems for keeping the panel updated about cases they have heard (National Minimum Standard 10)
- ensure that the constitution of the panel is compliant (National Minimum Standard 11)
- ensure panel operates within its remit in every case (National Minimum Standard 11)
- ensure that separate sets of panel minutes and decision making sheets are produced for each child (National Minimum Standard 12)
- update the recruitment and selection procedure to include the making of telephone enquiries to verify written references (National Minimum Standard 19)
- ensure that agency workers working for the agency have been subject to a robust recruitment process (National Minimum Standard 19)
- ensure that where financial support has been agreed to support a placement payment is prompt (National Minimum Standard 33)
- ensure that at senior management level a clear plan for providing counselling to birth parents in a timely way is developed and that all involved in adoption work are aware of these arrangements (National Minimum Standard 7)
- ensure that all life story work, including assessment reports about children is of a good quality and carried out in a timely way (National Minimum Standard 8)
- ensure the support services provided to people affected by adoption lead to positive outcomes being achieved (National Minimum Standard 17)
- ensure that paper files for adopters contain all required information (National Minimum Standard 25)
- ensure the rooms which contain adoption files are routinely locked. (National Minimum Standard 29)