

# Essex County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	Rosemary Dancer / Rosemary Chapman
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<b>Registered manager</b>	Tony Sharp
<b>Responsible individual</b>	Christine Hill
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	27/06/2005

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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

Essex County Council's adoption service is part of the Schools, Children and Families Directorate and is managed by the Service Manager (Adoption). The service consists of three locality recruitment, assessment and placement teams; a team specialising in direct work with children and placement of children with complex needs and a post adoption support team. There are 4 adoption team managers. It undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These include the recruitment, preparation assessment and approval of domestic adopters; the family finding and the matching and placement of children; support to placements both pre and post adoption order; post adoption support to adult adoptees and others and support to birth parents whose children will be or have been placed for adoption. The agency provides a service for people wanting to adopt from another country. Preparation in these circumstances is carried out by a registered agency which specialises in this work and assessment and approval is carried out by the adoption service. Support to domestic and intercountry adoption placements is provided by the agency and through service level agreements with Adoption Support Agencies via a contract with external agencies.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

At this announced full inspection all of the National Minimum Standards were assessed. There was one potential child protection incident noted which had not been dealt with particularly effectively and decision making in respect to this had not been placed on the relevant file. There are some other relatively minor areas unrelated to child protection which need to be addressed. However, overall this is a good service in most other respects with most areas of practice being of a good quality. Children are placed with adoptive families who have been well prepared to meet their needs into adulthood and beyond. Families are supported in making and maintaining stable placements for children and adopters support children in understanding their situation. Birth parents are supported in contributing to the planning for their child and in contributing to their child's understanding about his history and heritage. People touched by adoption, including adoptees and birth family members, are supported in making links with each other in adulthood in a professional and sensitive way. The agency is well managed overall and staff are well supported by the management team. Staff are committed to providing children with a safe, stable and secure family life.

## **Improvements since the last inspection**

The agency was required to update the child protection policy to include details for the arrangements for the protection of children placed for adoption. The updated safeguarding procedures include this detail and the information is easily accessible for staff and other professionals. The agency was asked to ensure that clarity was provided about the frequency of social workers contact with adopters waiting for a placement. The procedures clearly state that a minimum of eight weekly contact with approved adopters should occur. The agency was asked to ensure that consistent and sensitive practice was maintained in written communication with birth families. Workers take a sensitive approach to work with birth parents both in written and verbal communications. The agency was asked to ensure that the recruitment of internal applicants to the adoption teams included taking up two references for the applicant. This is now being done and it helps to ensure that staff are suitable and have the right skills and experience to carry out the role they have applied for. The agency was asked to ensure that the team managers in the adoption service were provided with management training. This has now occurred and contributes to the overall effectiveness of the management of the service. The agency was asked to provide training and development opportunities for childcare workers involved in adoption work. An impressive training programme and good opportunities for development are available to all members of staff and this helps people to keep their skills and knowledge up to date. The agency was asked to review and assess the arrangements for the storage of records in each office. There are detailed risk assessments in place for each office which show that the risk of damage to records has been minimised as far as is possible.

## **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 is a child-focused service that works hard to place children with families who will be able to meet their needs into adulthood and beyond. There is a written strategy in place in respect to recruiting those adopters most likely to be able to meet the needs of children in Essex waiting for a placement. The agency is professional in its approach to helping interested parties reach an informed decision about whether adoption is right for them. There is a fast track process in place for those applicants it seems will be most likely to meet the needs of children waiting for a placement. A more proactive approach in targeting specific communities is being considered to broaden the placement choice for children. There are good arrangements in respect to family finding for children with complex needs and these include using the local consortium and the national adoption register. The agency has a low rate of disruptions of adoptive placements which indicates that there are

sound matching processes in place. The agency ensures that children's views about placements are obtained and acted upon where appropriate.

There is a formal preparation, assessment and approval process in place. Preparation group content is comprehensive and most adopters feel well prepared for the task of parenting a child who may have a range of complex needs. One couple stated the experience "made them think about things and look outside the box". Another stated "This was very thorough....seemed to cover all aspects of adopting and the problems and pleasures it can bring". A process of evaluation of the quality of preparation groups is carried out using attendees' and presenters' views and there are plans in place for further internal and external reviews of the preparation sessions. This approach shows a willingness to adapt and develop the content of these groups in line with best practice.

All statutory checks are carried out on applicants and a number of referees are contacted. Overall assessment reports are of a good quality and in the main are analytical. The reports provide a good view about applicants' suitability to adopt.

For people who want to adopt a child from overseas, there are well-established arrangements with an agency which specialises in intercountry adoption matters. The information day and preparation courses were commended by adopters. The information is presented well by people who have a good knowledge about intercountry adoption. Relatives of potential intercountry adopters are provided with some training from the external agency to help them to understand the issues involved for the children. The home study process for intercountry adopters is carried out by skilled workers working for Essex who have a good knowledge about intercountry adoption.

Approved adopters who are adopting domestically are informed about the introduction and placement processes. When a match has been identified adopters are provided with information about the child. They are also provided with an opportunity to meet professionals involved with the child to discuss his needs. The agency supports the adopters in thinking about the implications of meeting these needs. Adopters and children are provided with information about each other and in some cases a DVD film is used. This is a good initiative which brings each party alive to each other.

Policies and procedures underpin the work of the 3 adoption panels. Panels are held in a timely way and provide a good level of scrutiny to the work of the agency. Recent cases heard at inquorate panels have been reheard by a quorate panel. Adopters attend panel for their approval and are treated with respect and sensitivity. The agency plans to open up attendance by adopters to the matching panel which will provide adopters with a chance to also be heard at this stage of the adoption process.

There is a good induction process in place and a very good training programme in place for members. This helps panel members to keep up to date with legal and practice issues. All intercountry adoption cases are heard by one of the three panels

which have had training specifically in these matters.

The arrangements for the administration of the panels are good and the panel administrators are key in supporting the effectiveness of the panel process. Good quality panel minutes are made but the extracts of minutes do not detail members' attendance and not all minutes are placed on the relevant case files.

The decision making is made in a timely way. The decision maker reads the papers presented to the panel but she does not have the panel minutes to inform her about the panel discussion and recommendations made when making her decision.

The recruitment practices are overall sound and ensure only people suitable to work with children are employed. However, the local authority operates an exemptions process whereby with senior management approval staff can commence work in children's services prior to a Criminal Records Bureau check having been carried out. This is poor practice although there was no evidence to suggest this process had been used in the adoption service. The managers and staff of the agency are appropriately experienced, qualified, skilled and knowledgeable about adoption matters and demonstrate a child focused approach to their work.

There is a countywide safeguarding procedure in place. A potential child protection issue was identified which had not been dealt with as effectively as it should have been. This could have left a child at risk of harm.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is good.

There are good strategies for supporting both domestic and intercountry adoption placements pre and post order. The services available are via service level agreements with external agencies and internal support. The agency takes a committed approach to supporting adopters in providing children with safe, stable and secure placements. Adopters are well prepared to take on the task of parenting a child from the care system and from another country and adopters are supported in considering the information about the child to be placed. Children from the care system needing an adoptive placement are also well prepared to join their new family. This approach ensures that placements are made on sound foundations. The arrangements for support pre-order include each family having a well thought out adoption support plan which is adapted in the event that needs or circumstances change. There are some good financial support packages provided to meet the assessed needs and direct work with children and families is carried out alongside a range of other work. This helps families to form successful and permanent attachments.

After an order has been granted the responsibility for supporting placements internally rests with the post adoption team. There is a duty system in place and the post adoption team can respond quickly to referrals. Services provided are flexible and are based on a careful assessment of individual needs for support. The agency

takes a child centred approach to this work, for example the team have developed a child friendly letter sent out when initial contact is made. This approach helps the workers to engage with children and use their views to inform future developments.

The agency has plans to enhance the good range of services available by the renegotiation of the contract with one of the support agencies they use to include some intensive and therapeutic counselling. It has identified that the arrangements for monitoring outcomes and user satisfaction in respect to the contracted out services is an area needing development in order that services can be designed in line with what families need and would find most useful. This demonstrates that it will take a more rigorous approach and that this information can be used when considering further developments in the support services aspect of adoption work.

When a placement is at risk of breaking down the Lionmede Centre, a clinical support service to children and families, is involved in supporting placements at risk of disruption. There is a disruption procedure in place which identifies the importance of all involved being provided with support. Disruption meetings are chaired by an independent chairperson. Detailed minutes are made and findings are used to inform future practice.

The agency has good access to legal and medical advice. In the main the medical advisers are proactive in ensuring all available medical information is obtained, assessed and discussed with adopters. The advisers have produced an informative series of booklets about a range of physical and mental health issues. Access to legal advice is good but the role is not governed by a written protocol. There is a dedicated adoption agency adviser who is independent from the management of cases who attends each panel meeting. Children have access to an independent reviewing officer for adoption which ensures that children's wishes, feelings and views are fed into the planning process by an officer who has expertise in adoption matters.

## **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

The agency provides services which reflect the lifelong implications of adoption. Social workers obtain and record most birth parents' views about the plan for their child. Some very sensitive and good quality work is being carried out under sometimes difficult circumstances including where English is not a parent's first language. Birth parents are provided with the opportunity of independent counselling at an early stage in the process and they can choose between an adoption worker or a worker from the adoption support agency contracted to carry out this work. The arrangements for monitoring and reviewing this work is not robust in every case.

Life story work including direct work, books and later in life letters are of a good quality but are not undertaken in a timely way in every case. Birth families are encouraged to contribute to this work so that the child has clear information about his early life. The agency facilitates a meeting between the birth parents and the



adoptive family in appropriate cases.

There is a robust letterbox system in place which is overall well managed. There is a reminder system in place if contact does not take place but no system to remind participants when the contact is due. This has meant that letters are not always received in a timely way. The agency also supports a number of direct contact arrangements.

The agency offers birth records counselling and intermediary work for adult adoptees and birth family members. A very sensitive and professional approach is taken to this work.

### **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. Good quality written information is provided to children about adoption and direct work is carried out with them to ensure that they are well prepared to move into a new family. Good quality written information is provided to adopters which explains the adoption processes and informs them about other related matters.

The agency is overall well managed at an operational and a strategic level. There are clear lines of communication and the management style is one which encourages and supports staff. Social workers are allocated cases on the basis of capacity and areas of expertise and interest. Staff receive regular good quality formal and informal supervision and there is an annual appraisal system in place. Staff are also supported via regular team meetings and peer support both within and across teams is good. One social worker stated that she "feels valued, they appreciate me" and another commented that her manager is "very good, utilises the team to the best effect".

There are excellent training opportunities available. These include access to internal and external training courses and include the opportunity to study for a post qualifying award. The contribution of the administrative staff, in terms of the general admin support they provide and to the operation of essential services such as the recruitment of adopters, the letterbox contact arrangements and the post adoption services is invaluable. One social worker described the administrative teams as being the backbone of the agency.

The working relationships within teams and across the teams are good with the shared aim of providing safe, stable and secure placements for children. Although

some adopters identified a level of disappointment about delays to some stages of the process the services provided from initial contact with the agency through to the order being made is well integrated. Representatives from agencies working with Essex view the agency as, communicating well with them and as having a forward looking approach to adoption work.

There are good monitoring systems in place, both in terms of management information and practice issues. In respect to children there are effective referral systems to the adoption team and good monitoring of timescales by the agency and the panel. The reports to the executive are provided on an annual basis; these need to be provided to the executive on at least a six monthly basis.

Case files for children and adopters are well structured and organised. Case notes are clear and there is a file audit system in place. Some gaps were noted on some files, for example, recording of decision making made in supervision, notifications to parents about decisions made by the agency and the minutes of panels. There is a robust system in place in respect to access to records which include the retrieval of files held in the archiving facility.

The records in respect of staff are well ordered and include the required information. Panel members files do not evidence that references have been obtained in respect of old panel members when the new panels were formed in 2005. Files do not evidence that references have been verified and do not contain proof of qualifications where relevant.

The premises the agency operates from are secure and there are adequate arrangements for the storage of files and security and safety of the information technology systems.

## 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 that all staff and managers are clear about the management of and reporting plan for actual and potential child protection issues (The Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations (England) 2003 Regulation 9)	16/05/2008

## Recommendations

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

- ensure panel minute extracts include the names of members in attendance and are placed on case files (National Minimum Standard 12)
- provide the panel minutes to the decision maker to inform her decision making (National Minimum Standard 13)
- ensure that under no circumstances workers commence work prior to a satisfactory Criminal Records Bureau Check having been received (National Minimum Standard 19)
- develop written protocols in respect to all specialist advisers (National Minimum Standard 18)
- ensure that lifestory work is carried out in a timely way in every case (National Minimum Standard 8)
- ensure that individual work with birth parents is subject to regular review and revision (National Minimum Standard 8)
- ensure that letterbox contact arrangements support the prompt exchange of information (National Minimum Standard 8)
- provide a written report to the executive of the council on at least a six monthly basis (National Minimum Standard 17)
- ensure that all necessary information is filed on case files (National Minimum Standard 25)
- ensure that all panel members files contain evidence of qualifications, where appropriate, and evidence that references have been obtained and that these have been verified by telephone enquiry. (National Minimum Standard 28)