

Nottinghamshire 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

Nottinghamshire County Councils Adoption Service is located within Direct Services to Children. It provides a comprehensive adoption service which includes advice and counselling; recruitment, assessment, approval, training and support of prospective adopters; the matching, introduction and placing of children for whom adoption is the permanent plan; post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption including birth records counselling, and intermediary services. The Council has service level agreements with other Voluntary Adoption Agencies and Adoption Support Agencies to provide an adoption service for those who wish to adopt from overseas, further support for adoptive families and independent support for birth parents.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This inspection was a key, announced inspection, carried out by two inspectors over a period of five days. Key personnel were interviewed, documentary evidence was read and service users interviewed and surveyed for their views of the service.

The agency is very good at recruiting appropriate adopters for the children who require families and making good matches. The preparation, assessment and approval of adopters is thorough and they are provided with good and full information about children's histories through the well-established practice of life appreciation days. The adoption panel provides robust scrutiny of the work of the agency.

Support to adopters is outstanding. Adopted children can access all appropriate services with the same priority as looked after children, including those provided through education, the youth service and health provisions. The Support After Adoption team undertake direct work including psychotherapy and there is a wide range of activities for adopted children to utilise. Adopters are given comprehensive welfare rights advice, have access to training, resources, support groups, social events and newsletters.

The service to birth parents is also outstanding and there is a life-long commitment to all involved in the adoption triangle. Birth parents are involved in planning, they contribute to maintaining the child's heritage through a pro-active and robust letterbox system, have access to support groups and are given advice, support and understanding when trying to contact adopted adults.

The management of the agency is good and staff are well supported in providing a

good service to children, birth parents, adopters and adopted adults through good managerial support, supervision and training opportunities.

The weaknesses identified relate to shortfalls in documentation and do not have a direct impact on the safety of children and young people.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the previous inspection, five actions were made. Of these, two relating to contents of children's adoption files and panel members' files remain outstanding, although some progress has been made. Eight recommendations were made at the previous inspection and all of these have been addressed.

At the previous inspection, arrangements for the support of adopters were very good. These have been strengthened further to provide an outstanding service in this outcome area. Staff have received training in 'Theraplay', the post adoption linking service has been developed, posts for an adoption nurse and youth worker have been put in place, resources for adopters can now be more easily accessed in local libraries and the participation of young people in saying what services they want has been improved. There is now a greater commitment to life story work for children, with plans to strengthen this further.

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 demonstrates a very positive attitude to the recruitment of a diverse range of adopters. It adopts a professional approach, exemplified by the employment of two recruitment and publicity officers who are able to use their media and marketing skills to the best advantage. They have a keen awareness of the needs of children who require adoptive families and take a proactive approach in trying to access black and ethnic minority communities. Specific children are featured in the media and this is done in a very professional and child-focussed way, involving the child in what is written about them, ensuring they are happy with how they are presented, to maintain and promote their self-esteem. Robust tracking meetings take place which ensure the adoption team are aware of the children who need families at an early stage. A matching criteria form is completed but this does not detail how the identified family can meet the needs. This is addressed in more detail in the Adoption Placement Report however. Sibling assessments are undertaken and account taken of the cultural and other needs of children. Good matches are made in a timely way, ensuring positive outcomes for children.

The agency has a formal, thorough approach to the preparation, assessment and approval of adopters to ensure that adopters are well prepared to undertake the parenting of an adopted child. Social workers make initial visits to enquirers, then once the agency accepts their application, they are invited to preparation groups which take place on a very frequent basis throughout the year. These are supplemented by an extra day on sexual abuse and another on contact. The agency also holds a day for family and friends, to enable them to know what is involved in the adoption process. Adopters have said that the preparation is useful and grandparents also gave positive feedback about the 'family and friends' day.

The agency undertakes appropriate checks on applicants including former partners and employers, although the recording of this on the assessment form was not universally consistent. Health and safety assessments are undertaken, as are pet questionnaires, to ensure the safety of children placed. The recording of Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks does not state that they are at the enhanced level although evidence was provided that they are. Assessments of adopters are of a reasonable standard and identify their strengths and vulnerabilities, although issues of diversity are not as widely addressed as they could be.

'Life appreciation' days are held routinely on all children placed for adoption and this ensures that full information is given to adopters first-hand from everyone who has been involved in the child's life. These are an effective and helpful tool and are minuted fully to ensure there is a good record for the adopter and the child. Introductions are well planned and a mid-way review system is well established to allow for any doubts to be expressed before a placement takes place.

The agency shows a strong commitment to progressing cases through the adoption panel process by having three adoption panels which meet monthly. The work of the adoption panel is underpinned by a comprehensive set of policies and procedures. The three panels are properly constituted, members are appropriately recruited, supported and trained and have annual appraisals. Panels are well organised and information is sent out to panel members in a timely way. Panel members give robust scrutiny to the work of the agency and are clear in their reasons for any recommendation made. Each panel member takes individual responsibility for giving their personal recommendation with the reasons. The minutes of the panel are good and reflect the business which has taken place, the discussion and reasons for the recommendation. Adopters can attend the panel for their approval and this invitation has been extended for matching panels from May 2008. They are made welcome and are given information about the process and the membership before they attend.

The agency decision is made in a timely way and is based on full information and the draft minutes. There is a good and effective system in place for the agency decision makers to meet with the panel chairs on a regular basis to discuss any issues which arise.

Managers and staff are subject to appropriate recruitment and selection procedures. The staff employed by the agency are knowledgeable, qualified, skilled, enthusiastic

and committed and provide a good service for adoptive families.

The agency has safeguarding procedures in place which refer to children placed for adoption. Refresher training is available for all staff and the staff interviewed demonstrate a good understanding of safeguarding issues.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The agency provides outstanding support to adoptive families both pre and post adoption order. Corporate parenting is utilised to its best advantage and universal services are well integrated into the adoption support provisions. Adopters say they feel well supported by their social worker and are aware that a variety of support can be accessed at any time throughout a child's life. Linking meetings have been recently established to ensure that the support needs of children and families are highlighted before placement and can be more easily put in place once they are required. Links with adopters are maintained through a regular newsletter to ensure they are aware of what is available to them and keep them in touch with the agency.

There are a number of very impressive initiatives which have been developed to extend the range of adoption support services available to families and children. A youth worker works in the adoption service for two days a week, although she is based in the Youth Service, which has the added advantage of facilitating access to resources on behalf of adopted children. A number of activities, which can include residential stays, take place each year for adopted children and evaluations by the young people indicate a high level of satisfaction with these. The older young people are involved in planning and organising activities, giving good evidence of participation and engagement. The youth worker can work flexibly with young people, including on a one-to-one basis, to facilitate their engagement in local youth groups or other activities. Young people produce their own newsletter which is sent to all adopted young people.

A post adoption linking scheme has been developed since the last inspection, which provides a link worker to work with an adopted child on a one-to-one basis, and in some circumstances, to enable the adoptive parents to have some time to themselves. The agency now has a service level agreement with Adoption UK who provide a number of support groups and social events to adopters throughout the county.

Other exemplary work is evident in the education service. Adopted children are entitled to receive the same service as looked after children, should their parents wish it, which entitles them to a priority service, including admission to school and other support. There are examples of work being undertaken with schools, including those outside the county and within the independent sector to increase teachers' understanding of attachment and the needs of adopted children. The educational psychological service is also able to work flexibly to meet the needs of adopted children.

A nurse has been appointed to work with adopted children and families, which again is an unusual initiative. She is able to raise the profile of the needs of adopted children within the health service and increase knowledge and understating of other professionals, for example, school nurses and health visitors. The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) has been reconfigured and now has a team specifically for looked after children and adopted children, which gives better access to that service across the whole county.

The adoption service employs a welfare rights worker who undertakes financial assessments of all adoptive families at a number of stages. This is extremely beneficial in enabling adopters to access all the benefits to which they are entitled. She has also been instrumental in ensuring attachment disorder is recognised for the purposes of obtaining Disability Living Allowance (DLA), which has been enormously helpful in relieving pressure on adoptive families and affirms and values their role.

The agency has a training officer who provides a range of courses for adoptive families. These are well publicised. Adoptive parents can now obtain resources through their local library which has improved their access to books, DVDs and so forth.

The County has invested in 'Theraplay' training for a number of staff which enhances the resources available to social workers to work with families. The 'support after adoption' team includes a psychotherapist who works directly with children and families, as do the social workers in that team.

The agency has access to legal and medical advice. The legal adviser is extremely knowledgeable and experienced, and his input is valued by the social workers. There have been some issues in relation to obtaining medical reports in time for the adoption panel but this is being addressed by senior management.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The agency demonstrates a real commitment to involving birth parents in the plans for their child's adoption. They are provided with clear written information which explains the process and the options available to them. The Child Permanence Reports (CPR) record their wishes and feelings and birth parents are encouraged to complete the section of the report to give their views. The agency has a service level agreement with a Voluntary Adoption Agency to provide independent support and counselling and birth parents are given this information at an early stage. Social workers demonstrate a good awareness of the importance of this service and are keen to promote it. They will do this at various stages as birth parents may not always be willing, or wish, to access it straight away.

The agency makes every effort to promote and maintain a child's heritage. It has developed procedural guidance which outlines the agency's commitment and the

expectation that social workers have a responsibility to complete this at the point of placement. Social workers demonstrate a very positive attitude to undertaking this important piece of work and are keen to do it to a good standard. They are supported in this through training, briefings and the expertise of other staff. The manager has identified that further assistance is needed to facilitate the more timely preparation of life story books and plans to appoint a specific worker to provide support and guidance and improve practice further.

There is an extremely robust letterbox system in place which is managed by a social worker with the addition of administrative support. There is written guidance on the operation of the letterbox for social workers, adopters and birth parents, practical assistance is given where necessary and a reminder is sent a month before the contact is due, demonstrating a proactive approach to the management of the system and emphasising its importance. The social worker holds surgeries to assist children's social workers in exploring appropriate contact arrangements. Every effort is made to assist with contact, which the agency sees as extremely important in maintaining a child's heritage. For example, interpreting and translation services are used to translate letters into other languages. A protocol for what happens once a child is 18 is in place and the letterbox can be extended after this time. Direct contacts are also facilitated where necessary.

The agency demonstrates a lifelong commitment to all involved in the adoption triangle. Birth mothers and fathers have access to support groups in Nottingham and this is being extended to the north of the county. The agency provides counselling for adopted adults and birth relatives, assists with birth relative initiated contact, provides assistance with tracing and an intermediary service. This is undertaken with extreme sensitivity and the workers demonstrate a real understanding of the needs of all parties and an awareness of how to balance these to ensure the safety and well-being of everyone. Birth relatives commented about the sensitivity and helpfulness of the staff they have come into contact with and feel they do all they can to assist.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency has a thorough statement of purpose which has been recently reviewed and approved by the Council. This is underpinned by comprehensive policies and procedures which govern the work of the agency, giving it direction and focus. The Children's Guide is a child-friendly document which outlines the meaning of adoption for a child and is used as a tool for working with children to help them understand what is going on in their lives.

Enquirers receive good, clear written information about the process, criteria, the children who need families and the expectations of adopters, which is well produced. This is supplemented by a post approval pack of further information to inform them about the next stage of the process.

The agency is well-managed at all levels. All managers are appropriately qualified, knowledgeable, experienced and skilled. Staff say they are 'aware and supportive', 'approachable and knowledgeable' and 'amenable to ideas' and are universally happy with the arrangements for their management and support. There are good links throughout the service; placing social workers have good and effective working relationships with the County Adoption Team, who in turn work well with the Support After Adoption team. This provides an effective and efficient adoption service. Regular team meetings take place to ensure that communication is good. Staff receive regular supervision, annual appraisals and their access to training is good, including specialist, external courses as well as in-house provision. This ensures the service to children and adopters is carried out professionally and to a good standard by people who are knowledgeable, skilled and well motivated. Adopters reflected this in various comments about their social workers which included: 'approachable, professional and supportive as well as having lots of knowledge and experience' and 'totally trustworthy'.

The Executive side of the Council has good monitoring systems in place which include arrangements for the involvement of looked after and adopted children to influence its operation and give their ideas. The lead member demonstrates a commitment and enthusiasm to provide excellent services to all young people in Nottinghamshire. Currently, the Executive side of the Council does not receive twice yearly reports on the management and outcomes of the adoption agency. Some of the systems for quality assuring the work of the agency are less effective. Some shortfalls in documentation and processes were noted during the inspection. For example, the quality assurance of paperwork presented to panel is not as robust as it should be and there is evidence that errors are not highlighted in time and that amendments to paperwork are not consistently carried out as requested. In another case, where a child was placed for adoption, the CRB check was over two years old, which is contrary to the guidance.

The agency has sufficient staff to fulfil its duties. Nottinghamshire is a fair and competent employer and staff are happy to work for the Council and say it is child-focussed.

Nottinghamshire's case records are mainly electronic and still in the process of being fully implemented. Children's adoption files do not contain all the required information. Files on adopters are generally compliant and there is evidence of supervision decisions and file audits in place. The manager maintains a separate record of complaints.

Staff personnel files do not provide evidence of telephone verification of referees and the CRB reference does not state it is enhanced. The files on adoption panel

members and post adoption link workers do not meet the requirements of the regulations.

Currently the adoption service operates from three locations but the plan is for the two bases in Nottingham to relocate to the premises in Mansfield in the very near future. These premises are accessible, identifiable and suitable for purpose. They are well equipped and secure.

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
25	ensure that children's adoption files contain all the information required by regulation (Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, regulation 12)	29/08/2008
28	ensure that files on staff, panel members and link workers meet the requirements of the regulations and schedule 4 (Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations 2003, regulation 11 and 15).	29/08/2008

Recommendations

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

- ensure the Executive side of the Council receive twice yearly reports on the management and outcomes of the adoption agency (NMS 17)
- ensure the quality assurance systems for monitoring documentation and processes are more robust. This includes paperwork coming to the adoption panel, alterations requested by the panel and the system for monitoring the date of CRB checks identifies in advance when these are due for renewal (NMS 17)
- ensure the recruitment and selection procedures for staff reflect the need for telephone verification of all written references. Documentation in relation to CRB checks should state they are at an enhanced level (NMS 28).