

# Herefordshire District Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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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

Herefordshire County Council's adoption service consists of one adoption team which undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These include the recruitment, preparation and assessment 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 via a contract with an external agency.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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. While a number of issues were identified that need addressing in respect to the staying safe outcome area overall the arrangements for recruiting preparing and assessing adopters is sound. This work is carried out by a committed team of adoption and child care social workers who keep the child at the centre of the process. The arrangements for approval of adopters and recommendations about children and placements to be made are generally carried out with the rigour needed to ensure sound placements are made. The shortfalls needing attention include; rescheduling the stage at which a formal application is made by adopters, ensuring that each of the applicants employment history includes the months of employment, ensure that each panel is quorate at all times and amend and update the safeguarding procedures in line with new legislation.

The work of the agency in respect to the support services is not governed by a clear written strategy which details the types of support services the agency provides and how they will be evaluated. However, in respect to practice in this area there is some sound and even good pieces of work being carried out.

The arrangements for the management of the agency at a practice level are sound. The team manager exercises good leadership over the practice of the team and the social work staff are skilled and committed individuals who take a child focused approach to the work they carry out. The arrangements in respect to the structure of the agency at a more senior level are new as is the post holder of the service manager role. The senior management team are considering issues around the

strategic development of the agency and intend to use the findings of this inspection to help inform their planning.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

The agency was required to implement written policies and procedures about the arrangements for the protection of children placed for adoption. It developed these but they have not updated them following the introduction of further legislation in this area. The agency was required to ensure that up to date records are kept in relation to all people working for the purposes of the agency. It has shown some improvement in the quality of the information maintained but there remain some more minor gaps on some files. The agency was required to ensure that there are a sufficient number of persons working for the agency. This has been fully addressed in respect to the staffing of the adoption team. In respect to the fieldwork teams some additional posts have been created and recruited to although the personnel have not yet commenced employment. The agency was required to carry out a risk assessment ensure that the risk of damage to archived records is minimised. This has not been addressed.

The agency was asked to develop a recruitment plan in respect of the recruitment of adopters. This is now in place. It was asked to ensure that adopters are prepared for addressing the issues they are likely to encounter and to identify the strengths they will need to have or develop. This is now taking place and adopters are well prepared to parent a child with complex needs. The agency was asked to ensure the outcomes of Criminal Records Bureau checks (CRBs) are carried out and to document the procedure in the event of an adverse CRB being returned. The first part of this recommendation has been met the second part has not. It was asked to ensure that CRB checks are undertaken on all staff and ensure the results are recorded. This is now occurring. The agency was asked to develop a comprehensive therapeutic service for children and a system to evaluate the effectiveness of the service. This has been partly addressed. The agency was asked to ensure that birth parents have the opportunity to read and comment on the information written about them. This has been addressed. It was asked to develop clear strategies for working with and supporting children, adopters and birth families. This has not been fully addressed although some new services have been introduced. The agency was asked to ensure that child care staff are supported in improving the quality of the reports about children and their needs. The quality of the reports are much improved. The agency was asked to provide reports to the executive on a six monthly basis. This has not been achieved. It was asked to ensure the arrangements for administrative support are adequate. This has been achieved and both the arrangements for this support and the calibre of the workers is of a high standard. The agency was asked to ensure that staff policies encourage the retention of salaried staff. While such arrangements are in place they are seen by some staff as having been divisive. The agency was asked to ensure that decisions by supervisors are recorded on files. This is now occurring. It was asked to develop a system to monitor the quality and adequacy of records and ensure that remedial action is taken where necessary. This has not been put into place. It was asked to develop a children's guide that is suitable for all

children. The agency has developed a range of guides for children and these can be reproduced in other languages or formats as required.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is not judged.

### **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is satisfactory.

The recruitment plan identifies that it is usually necessary to place Hereford children outside of the local area due to issues of anonymity. The agency works closely with the local adoption consortium and makes use of the national adoption register when looking for placements for Herefordshire children. Initial enquirers are welcomed without prejudice but with the needs of children waiting for a placement held in mind.

People who wish to adopt a child from another country attend preparation sessions run by a agency which specialises in this work and then return to the agency for assessment.

In respect to domestic adopters there is a thorough approach taken to the preparation and assessment of adopters. However, the formal application to adopt is not taken in a timely way. This means that applicants do not have access to the formal routes of appealing an adverse decision about their suitability from the point of the assessment commencing. The preparation groups held prepare prospective adopters well for parenting a child with a complicated background. The assessment process is in depth and child focused. The assessment reports identify the capacity of the applicants to parent a children who have complex needs arising from their backgrounds. During the assessment process the work history for some applicants have not included the start and end dates of employment. This makes it difficult to check out any gaps in employment. The procedure for managing an adverse Criminal Records Bureau check is not well documented so applicants are not well informed about how decisions are made in these circumstances.

There are sound arrangements in place in respect to the family finding and matching processes. This ensures that children are placed with adopters who are well informed about the child and his needs. It also ensures that children are placed with the people who are best able to meet these needs. Care is taken in ensuring that children have been consulted about the plans where they are of an age and level of understanding to be able to express their views.

The panel is governed by written policies and procedures and are convened regularly. The procedures do not detail the method of providing feedback to the agency on the quality of the cases being presented. This leaves the quality assurance

role of the panel underdeveloped. There is a well established practice in applicants attending panel in order that they can be part of the approval process. Their attendance is sensitively handled by the panel members and the chair.

The panel is well organised and administered and members take a child focused approach to the proceedings. The chair of the panel is very experienced and knowledgeable in adoption matters and ensures that all of the panel members are enabled to voice their opinions. While the membership of the panel is as required by legislation there has been one recent occasion when the panel commenced proceedings before the panel was properly constituted. This could put into question the legality of the recommendation and subsequent decision made by the agency. There are sound arrangements in respect to specialist advice in the areas of health, legal and education. The process in place in respect to decision making is robust and decisions are made promptly. All relevant people are informed of the decision in a timely way.

The manager and staff working for the agency are all appropriately qualified, experienced and knowledgeable about working with children and adoption matters. Recruitment procedures and practices are sound and ensure that people working for the agency are suitable.

The agency has written local safeguarding procedures which relate to children who are placed for adoption. However, the focus of the procedures is on the adopters. This does not allow for situations of abuse by people other than the adopters including situations of historical abuse. In addition the procedure does not include children receiving a support service or how allegations of historical abuse should be dealt with.

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

The provision is good.

The work of the agency in the area of supporting adoptive families is not governed by a clear written strategy. This means that it is difficult for the agency to evaluate the impact support services have on outcomes for children and families. There are no clear arrangements after an adoption order has been made for support to children and families from the education and mental health services. This means that after an order has been made some adoptive families are not supported in meeting the educational and emotional needs of their children. The agency does have a service level agreement with a registered adoption support agency and membership of two national organisations which provide advice and support to the agency and adopters.

Despite the lack of a clear overall strategic approach to support services the adoption team has developed some good services to meet the needs of adoptive families. There are support plans in place in respect to each placement made and these are subject to review. Adoption workers continue working with families up until an order has been made or beyond if necessary. Adopters are well supported via their individual worker in making and maintaining stable placements for children. Other

services available include workshops, family days and support groups all of which adopters find useful. Intercountry adopters can use these mainstream support services.

Adopters support their children well in gaining an understanding about their background and are good advocates for their children. When difficulties arise in placements all parties are supported in maintaining the placement or bringing it to a planned end. Meetings are held to discuss the likely reasons for the placement breakdown and these are used to guide future practice.

A good range of specialist advice is available to the panel and the agency. The medical adviser takes a very proactive approach to her role and ensures that all medical information is obtained and shared with prospective adopters. The legal advice to panel and the agency is readily available as is advice around educational issues at this stage in the proceedings. The agency also has the services of a clinical psychologist whose support is seen as invaluable by adopters and social workers. The agency has developed written protocols to govern the work of the specialist advisers.

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

The provision is satisfactory.

The work of the agency in the area of supporting birth parents is not governed by a clear written strategy. This means that it is difficult for the agency to evaluate the impact support services have on the outcomes for them and their children. However, there is a support service available from within the agency via the adoption team and via a service level agreement with a registered adoption support agency. The arrangements for encouraging birth parents to take up these services are not especially robust and this disadvantages parents who need a bit of encouragement to engage in the work. For parents who do engage with the agency some sensitive pieces of work are carried out by the adoption team and this enables these parents to be as fully involved as is possible in the planning for their child.

The agency takes an active approach to gathering information about children's backgrounds, sharing the information with adopters and the child where appropriate and undertaking life story work including the development of a life-story book. Where it is safe to do so there is a one-off meeting arranged between the birth parents and the adoptive family. This means that birth parents can provide adopters with important information about the child and his background. The agency operates a letter box contact system to facilitate ongoing indirect contact between adoptees and their birth families and it provides all parties with assistance in writing letters where this is requested. This work ensures that birth parents are supported in contributing to the maintenance of their child's heritage.

The agency offers birth records counselling for adult adoptees and birth parents. This is sensitively handled and people are treated with respect whatever their circumstances. The agency does not undertake intermediary work but will refer



people needing this service on to an agency which does carry out this work. This work ensures that people affected by adoption, be they a birth family member or an adoptee of any age, are supported in understanding their background.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is satisfactory.

The work of the agency is governed by a Statement of Purpose and supporting policy and procedure documents. These provide the framework for the service but currently the arrangements for support services are not clearly stated in these documents so people are not well informed about what the arrangements for support services are. The guides which have been developed to inform children about adoption are informative and interactive and provide children with a overall view of what to expect. The information provided to adopters is informative and welcoming and information can be provided in a range of other formats if required.

The nominated manager for the adoption service is suitably social work qualified and has experience in child care and adoption law and practice. She has satisfactory management skills although she currently does not have a management qualification. The manager is highly thought of by her staff and other professionals and exercises sound leadership of the service on a practice level. The management arrangements in respect to more senior managers has gone through very recent restructure and changes in terms of personnel. The executive of the agency do not receive written reports on the management and outcomes of the service every six months but receive an annual report. This does not enable the executive to closely monitor the work of the agency.

Workers are supported well in their roles by the agency manager and the administrative support provided to the adoption workers is of a very good standard. The social workers from the adoption team and the children's teams have developed good supportive working relationships with each other which benefits children and adopters. Training needs are identified through the supervision and appraisal process. The adoption team workers and the placing social workers show a good commitment to ensuring the best possible outcomes are achieved for the children they work with and many of the adopters spoke about how their worker had gone over and above the call of duty to ensure that they received the support they needed.

In respect to the case files for adopters and children there is insufficient attention to detail. For example the panel minutes do not all state the attendees and the capacity under which they are attending. This means that quoracy cannot be determined in

respect of each panel sitting and in the future adoptees accessing their files will not have full information about the panel which heard their case. While overall case files are well maintained, the quality and adequacy of records is not being monitored and therefore remedial action is not being taken where files fall below the required standard. There has not been an evaluation and review of the arrangements for the files stored in the archive facility. This means that the agency cannot evidence that the risk from damage to the files has been minimised.

The agency has policies and procedures in place which address data protection, case recording, access to records, storage and retention. It maintains separate records for workers and panel members. Some of the staff files have some minor omissions, and do not meet the required standard. For example in one case there is no evidence that the individual held a qualification relevant to her role. This means that a robust recruitment process cannot be evidenced in every case.

The premises the agency operates from are in the main suitable for purpose 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
1	include in the Statement of Purpose the procedure for assessing needs for adoption support services (National Minimum Standard 1 The Local Authority Adoption Service (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2005 Regulation 12)	30/06/2008
25	evidence that information in relation to a person's adoption is at all times kept in secure conditions and in particular that all appropriate measures are taken to prevent theft, unauthorised disclosure, damage, loss or destruction (The Disclosure of Adoption Information (Post-Commencement Adoptions) Regulations 2005 Regulation 5)	30/06/2008

### Recommendations

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

- ensure the application to adopt is taken before any assessment work commences

- with adopters (National Minimum Standard 4.1)
- ensure that the work history for each applicant includes the start and end dates of employment (National Minimum Standard 4.8)
  - document the procedure for managing an adverse Criminal Records Bureau check (National Minimum Standard 4.8)
  - include the method of providing feedback to the agency on the quality of cases being presented to the panel in the panel procedures (National Minimum Standard 10.2)
  - ensure the panel is properly constituted before proceedings commence (National Minimum Standard 11.1)
  - amend the Safeguarding Procedures to place the focus on the child, to include children and others using the support services and to include situations of allegations about historical abuse (National Minimum Standard 32.1 and 32.4)
  - produce a clear strategic plan for the development and evaluation of the support services provided to adoptive families (National Minimum Standard 6.2)
  - ensure that adopted children and families have full access to all specialisms needed (National Minimum Standard 18.4)
  - consider ways in which birth parents can be supported in becoming involved in the planning for their child even where they are contesting that plan (National Minimum Standard 7.2)
  - develop a clear strategic plan for the development and evaluation of the support services provided to birth family members (National Minimum Standard 9.1)
  - ensure that the manager of the adoption service commences and completes a management qualification (National Minimum Standard 14.2)
  - ensure that the executive receive written reports on the management and outcomes of the service on a six monthly basis (National Minimum Standard 17.3)
  - ensure that the extracts of panel minutes which are placed on files include the list of attendees and that all documents are signed (National Minimum Standard 25.1)
  - develop and implement a system to monitor the quality and adequacy of records and ensure that remedial action is taken where necessary (National Minimum Standard 27.3)
  - ensure that full information is available in respect to all people who work for the purposes of the agency (National Minimum Standard 28.2).