

Suffolk County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Rosemary Chapman / Rosemary Dancer
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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

Suffolk County Council's Adoption Agency is part of the Corporate Parenting Section of Suffolk's Children and Young People's Directorate, based at premises in Thorndon and Ipswich. As a Local Authority Adoption Agency it is responsible for undertaking, or making arrangements for, all the statutory adoption responsibilities and duties. These include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of prospective adopters; the matching and placement of children; providing assessments for, and a variety of, post adoption support to adoptive children and families; counselling and support to birth families; assistance and counselling to adopted adults who wish to see their birth records; intermediary services including tracing and reunions and assistance with indirect and direct contact arrangements. It undertakes domestic and step parent adoptions and has a service level agreement with a Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) for anyone wishing to adopt a child from overseas.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This inspection was a full, announced inspection.

The agency provides a strong, child-focused adoption service to children and families. The assessment of adopters is thorough and good procedures are in place for early referral of children to the adoption team, which results in appropriate matches being made in a timely way.

Adoption support is an outstanding feature of the service. This has undergone significant development and investment over the last three years and provides a range of interventions to support adoptive families. Multi-agency working is effective, particularly in relation to educational and psychological services.

Birth families are involved in adoption plans and invited to attend the adoption panel to give their views. They are able to access independent support to assist them, they receive help with maintaining indirect and direct contact with their children and are treated with respect.

The agency as a whole is extremely well-managed. All staff are appropriately qualified, experienced, skilled and knowledgeable and are supported by effective structures, excellent training opportunities and regular supervision. Recommendations have been made in relation to improvements in some documentation and to strengthen the letterbox system.

Improvements since the last inspection

Following the last inspection, the agency had one action which related to panel members' files. This has been completed satisfactorily. It also had seven recommendations which have all been addressed. There has been significant investment in the service, with additional social worker posts being provided, an extra adoption panel established and significant developments in adoption support.

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 well thought out recruitment strategy which has been developed with the needs of Suffolk children at the forefront. It addresses how to improve the recruitment of adopters for children with disabilities, older children, sibling groups and children from black and ethnic minority groups. A recruitment officer has been recently appointed to take this strategy forward, showing a real drive and commitment to develop and improve the service through formal data collection and evaluation of the best ways of achieving results, with the full backing and support of the adoption team and manager.

The procedure for matching children with adopters is thorough, facilitating the placement of children with appropriate families to meet their assessed and diverse needs without undue delay. This is made possible by the early referral of children with a plan for adoption to the adoption team followed by a formal referral meeting which addresses issues such as the preparation of children, contact and life story information with time scales and responsibilities for tasks agreed. The majority of children are placed within the County, although families from other areas and agencies can be used to meet the specific needs of children if in-house families are not appropriate. There is good evidence that sibling attachments are thoroughly assessed, sometimes using an external resource.

The agency has a formal, thorough procedure for the preparation, assessment and approval of adopters. The preparation course is evaluated and has been developed to take into account the diverse needs of attendees to ensure everyone is welcomed and enabled to take an active and effective part. Adopters said they found the course informative and had the opportunity to meet adopters, the medical adviser, the adoption support team and have a further day on behaviour management. Assessments are comprehensive and social workers use a variety of techniques during their assessments including attachment style interviews. Checks and references are similarly thorough and include all former partners and employers. However, not all of the chronologies of employment history include months, which

could lead to a gap in employment history not being explored thoroughly.

The agency ensures that prospective adopters receive full information about the children with whom they are being matched in order to promote appropriate and effective placements. This is enhanced by the practice of the family finding social workers who always read the child's file and get to know the child and foster carer. Although life appreciation days are not routinely held, adopters meet significant people in the child's life so they can hear first hand details of the child's experience in particular settings. The medical adviser will always see adopters to help them understand the implications of medical issues and family histories and follows this up with detailed written information. This ensures that adopters are fully informed and prepared for the child joining their family. Children are well prepared through the use of innovative ways of introducing the family to them such as DVDs and placemats as well as the more usual family books.

The adoption panel is appropriately constituted and its operation is underpinned by comprehensive policies and procedures. Adopters are invited to attend for their approval and have recently been invited to attend for matching also. They report that although it is a daunting experience, they are made welcome and put at ease. More unusually, Suffolk has a well-established practice of inviting birth parents to attend the adoption panel to give their views; the process has been well thought out and a lot of effort is put into facilitating their attendance, making them feel welcome and enabling them to make a meaningful contribution.

The adoption panel is well organised, well administered and comprehensive minutes are produced which reflect the discussion and reasons for the recommendation. The extract of the minutes on the case files do not detail the panel members, however, and siblings do not have individual minutes. A third panel has been established to ensure that cases are considered in a timely way. The panel membership reflects a range of personal and professional experience and members are able to access good training, both with the agency staff and with a neighbouring authority's adoption panel, which enables them to be well informed and keep abreast of any changes.

The agency decision is made within the appropriate timescales and there are systems in place which ensure there are no delays if the primary decision maker is unavailable, or disagrees with the panel recommendation. All relevant parties receive both verbal and written notification of the agency decision.

The agency has robust recruitment and selection procedures for staff which reflect safe practice in line with guidance and regulations. The safeguarding procedures address the needs of children placed for adoption and receiving adoption support services and give appropriate emphasis to the specific needs of their situation. All staff have undertaken recent safeguarding training.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The agency demonstrates an excellent commitment to supporting adoptive families and has invested in the service; the Council recently approved increased funding to provide an extra post, staff are supported to undertake specialist training and additional professional, clinical supervision and consultation is made available to them to ensure that the service they give to families, both post placement and post adoption order, is of an extremely high standard. The preparation course includes a session from the adoption support team and a supplementary day on behaviour management, which adopters said was very useful, and this provides a strong foundation on which to build. The adoption support plans are detailed and adopters express confidence that support will be available when they need it. Approved adopters have the first year's membership of Adoption UK paid for and they also have access to the "Buddy Scheme". Once a child is placed with them, they receive regular support from their social worker until the adoption order is made.

There is a range of support available to adopters post order. Initial assessments are very thorough and detailed, they are shared with the adopters, have review dates built in and are focused. A range of therapeutic assessments and interventions are used to support families and promote positive relationships within families. These include theraplay, direct work with children and training on attachment. There are support groups, social events, activity days for families and older children and access to a range of training. There is regular consultation and evaluation, with clear evidence of a responsive approach. For example, adopters and children said they wanted something for older adopted children and an activity day was arranged, which was very successful. The adoption support team are also closely involved with schools, in conjunction with the Looked After Children's Education Support Services (LACESS) team; they have developed written guidance for teachers, have run group work programmes, provided training on attachment for designated teachers and assisted with information for statements.

The specialist Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) is developing and has drop-in sessions for professionals and a swift referral to mainstream services if required. Suffolk has a service level agreement with Family Futures, who offer regular consultation sessions for social workers and families in addition to therapeutic intervention, co-working, clinical supervision and training on theraplay and assessment and intervention. There is clear evidence of good and effective multi-agency working to ensure that adoptive families are provided with the support they need as quickly as possible.

The medical adviser is described by staff as 'outstanding'; she is closely involved with the adoption service, is very child-focused and committed, provides a session on the preparation course, is keen for adopters to use her expertise at any time, prepares written reports on children's and birth parents' health issues and liaises closely with other health professionals to ensure they have full information about children. The

legal adviser is also committed and attends every adoption panel and is described by staff as excellent and accessible.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency clearly values the contribution of birth parents and treats them with respect and dignity. They are encouraged to contribute to the Child Permanency Report (CPR) and their contribution is further enhanced by the invitation to attend the adoption panel when their child is being considered for approval for adoption. This is extremely good and unusual practice and is to be commended. An independent service is available to give them support through this process and social workers are aware of the importance of birth parents with, for example, learning difficulties, having appropriate advocacy. The CPRs seen are of a variable standard; some contain too much unnecessary information directly taken from the case file, others have spelling mistakes and corrections in pencil.

The agency recognises the importance of maintaining the child's heritage and has put in place a number of mechanisms, such as training and support for staff, to improve life story work and life story books. This remains variable in quality and timeliness however. The agency is keen to make appropriate arrangements to support both indirect and direct contact arrangements; birth relatives commented very positively about the support they receive in maintaining these arrangements: 'the social worker is nice and kind and looks after me well, making sure I am fed and watered'. The contact is handled sensitively so that everyone can enjoy and benefit from it. The letterbox is very well organised and well managed; the files are extremely well maintained, showing a strong understanding of the importance of indirect contact for an adopted child. There is no automatic reminder system in the current arrangements however, and the letters are initially read by a non social work member of staff. Some of the indirect contacts lead to further work with birth parents; help with letter writing is available and the adoption support team are happy to pick up other issues.

The work with adopted adults and birth relatives is handled sensitively. There are clear policies and procedures which underpin the work, and the welfare of everyone is considered. There is a waiting list for this work to be carried out, although the agency prioritise people who need the service as soon as possible for age or health reasons. The agency undertakes birth records counselling, access to records, birth relative imitated contact, tracing, intermediary services and reunions.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The agency's statement of purpose, together with the underpinning policies and procedures, provide an effective structure for the adoption service. All the documents are clear and comprehensive and social workers commented that they felt supported in their practice by the policies and procedures. The written information for enquirers is of a similarly high standard, with adopters commenting that they felt well informed. The initial written information is supplemented by monthly information evenings and drop-in sessions, the latter arranged to encourage particular groups of people to make enquiries more easily.

The agency is extremely well managed, both structurally and operationally, by qualified, experienced, skilled, committed, enthusiastic and knowledgeable people, who give good leadership. It is evident that they want to provide the best possible service to children and families and show no sense of complacency or defensiveness, in order to drive the service forward. Staff feel well supported by the management structure; there are clear lines of accountability, delegation and communication across the whole service. Staff report that senior managers are involved and communicate significant changes to them. The executive are well informed and there are effective systems in place to ensure regular monitoring takes place.

The staff team are experienced, knowledgeable, committed and professional. Children's social workers speak highly of the adoption team, calling them child-focused, professional, sensitive, supportive and efficient. The administrative staff are also valued and everyone comments on good working relationships across teams. Staff are enabled to undertake their roles effectively and efficiently through regular supervision, good access to training, peer support and team meetings. There is an impressive level of high quality training and access to clinical supervision and consultation. The agency has invested to develop the skills of the staff group to facilitate the provision of a professional service. There are sufficient staff to undertake the statutory duties required of them.

Case records on adopters and children are well maintained, indexed, audited, with clear case decisions by supervisors. Personnel and panel members' files are similarly well-constructed and contain all the necessary information. The IT systems are backed up very regularly and are secure, ensuring adopter and children's information cannot be accessed by anyone who is not authorised to do so.

There is a very thorough business continuity plan for the adoption service. The archive arrangements are reasonable and a comprehensive risk assessment is currently underway to ensure that records are protected adequately from damage by fire and water. There are extremely robust arrangements in place when people need to retrieve any archived records. The adoption service currently operates from two premises which are accessible, identifiable and suitable for their purpose.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The agency has a clear focus

on meeting the diverse needs of children, is making strenuous efforts to recruit adopters from a range of backgrounds and constantly strives to facilitate access to services and gain the involvement of everyone.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- ensure that all chronologies address months as well as years (NMS 4)
- ensure the panel minute extract on the case file details the panel membership and each sibling has a separate minute (NMS 12)
- ensure that CPRs are of an acceptable standard (NMS 7)
- develop the letterbox system so that all contacts are read by social workers and there is an automatic reminder system in place (NMS 8).