

Northamptonshire County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

Unique reference number	SC056764
Inspection date	27/11/2008
Inspector	Vivien Slyfield
Type of inspection	Key

Setting address	Norborough House, Coverack Close, Northampton, Northamptonshire, NN4 8PQ
Telephone number	01604 432550
Email	slowe@northamptonshire.gov.uk
Registered person	Northamptonshire County Council
Registered manager	Sue Lowe
Responsible individual	Martin Pratt
Date of last inspection	28/11/2005

© Crown copyright 2008

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

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

This is a Local Authority Adoption Service based on the outskirts of Northampton. It is part of the services for children provided by Northamptonshire County Council. It aims to provide 'stable, secure adoptive families for children who are unable to remain with their family of origin and for whom adoption is judged the alternative to secure their long-term well being'. There is a joint recruitment and training team for adoption and fostering. The adoption team undertake all initial contacts with prospective adopters and prepare, train, assess and support them. The adoption team matches approved adopters with children and provides on-going support for them directly and through support groups, training, family days and a regular newsletter. This service also assesses and supports prospective inter-country adopters. Birth records counselling and intermediary services are available to adopted adults and support is offered to adoptive families. An independent service is offered to birth families through agreement with Adoptionplus.

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 in which all the key National Minimum Standards were considered.

The adoption service provides a good service to children, adopted adults and adopters. The recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters is thorough and the adoption panels provide appropriate scrutiny of approvals. The system for matches allows effective early notification of children's needs and has a useful matrix to match their needs with the skills of adopters. All staff are subject to sound recruitment and selection procedures, although the recording on personnel and panel members files does not consistently reflect this practice.

Adoptive families are well supported. Birth families and adopted adults also receive a sensitive and supportive service. The service to birth families is provided by a service level agreement with Adoption4e56nplus. Life story work is undertaken but is sometimes constricted by other pressures on children's social workers. Children's heritage is promoted through a robust letterbox system.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last report identified eight requirements. Of these only three are not fully met. The restructuring has addressed a number of issues, including an increase in staffing levels. There is a more robust system for the appointment of staff and the renewal of their CRB checks. The panel members files however, are not yet fully compliant.

Reports on the adoption service are now sent to the executive at least every six months. The statement of purpose and the children's guide do not as yet fully cover the regulatory requirements and the child protection procedures do not currently focus on children placed for adoption and make no reference to historical abuse or those using adoption support service.

There were 15 recommendations in the previous report. All but one of these is met. Diversity training has been provided. A matching matrix has been developed, as have panel policies and procedures and protocols for the specialist advisers. Panel now does not make recommendations subject to CRB disclosure and panel has had training in issues relating to inter-country adoption. The panel minutes are now appropriate. Action has been taken to address the training and support needs of unqualified staff. The development of the Permanence Team has addressed support for adoptive parents. There is evidence of disruption meetings being held to consider situations where this has occurred. The service to birth parents has been developed and enhanced through the agreement with Adoptionplus. The executive receive reports on the adoption service at least twice per year. A risk assessment has been carried out in relation to the archive facility for adoption records. The outstanding area is the need to further prioritise life story work. There has been considerable progress in this area but some staff still report difficulties in finding time for this work.

There is a real sense of progress and a strong commitment to the development of the adoption service in Northamptonshire. Some of the practice is dynamic and forward thinking and undertaken by committed, knowledgeable staff.

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 service demonstrates a very positive attitude to the recruitment of a diverse range of adopters. Initial recruitment is undertaken by the Recruitment Team which recruits both adopters and foster carers. The effectiveness of the recruitment is seen in the fact that the service can usually place children with their own adopters. They have made particular efforts to recruit from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups, with a recent event leading on to links being made with specific groups within these communities.

There is a clear and effective process for people to make initial contact with the service and receive information about adoption. Initial visits are undertaken by staff in the adoption team and provide the opportunity to provide and receive information by both parties. Information Evenings are run approximately every six weeks and

found useful by prospective adopters. Early checks are undertaken appropriately as necessary, to allow essential information to be shared at an early stage.

The application to be assessed as a prospective adopter is taken before the applicants attend the preparation group. The groups cover appropriate information and are seen by adopters as being informative and useful. The service also expects applicants to attend 'core' training before they are matched with a child. This provides a wider base of information and allows issues to be explored in some depth. The provision of preparation groups for 'grandparents and significant others' is seen as good practice and is well received by prospective adopters and their families.

The written Prospective Adopter Assessments Reports (PARs) are of a reasonable quality. They include issues of diversity and contain clear social work analysis. The assessing social workers are very clear that they will seek local authority references for applicants over the past 10 years and will undertake references from abroad when it is appropriate. These are not consistently recorded on the files. The health and safety checks seen did not include guns, weapons, ceremonial knives and hanging cords. There is a second opinion visit to prospective adopters toward the end of their assessment, which is reported to the adoption panel as part of their assessment. This is noted as good practice.

There are written policies and procedures in place to support the operation of the adoption panels. There are two panels, which each meet twice per month. They are suitably operated with appropriate membership. Efforts have been made and continue to improve the BME representation on the panels. The panels currently do not have representation from an education perspective. The role of the panel adviser rests with the adoption team manager. While this allows for the inclusion of adoption knowledge and expertise it allows little time within her full role for the scrutiny of panel papers and diminishes the quality assurance aspect of the role as the work has been agreed by the staff she manages. The panel administrator manages the panels very efficiently and minutes the panel meetings clearly and accurately. There were no reports of delays in being able to get dates to attend a panel. The evidence is that the panels are suitably and effectively chaired. However, the discussion and consideration of the needs of siblings are not clearly separated and do not retain a clear, systematic focus on the needs of each individual child.

The panels have had training in inter-country adoption and plan training to allow members to sign their names when panel is attended by applicants with hearing impairment. There is no specific joint annual training which includes both social workers and panel members, although there is training which both groups attend.

The agency decision is made in a timely fashion with consideration of all the relevant information. The decision maker takes the responsibility seriously and draws on knowledge, skills and experience of social work practice. He sees the significance of the role in 'making a difference for children'.

The matching process between children and adopters incorporates early notification to the adoption team of children who may need adoptive families. There is evidence

of the practice of 'parallel planning' to allow children to be placed without delays. Northamptonshire Adoption Service has developed the use of 'Parents for Children Evenings', which provide information about children needing adoptive families and allows the assessment of interested prospective adopters to be 'fast-tracked'. This is mainly used for children who have complex needs. The evidence about the effectiveness of the system is indicated in a low disruption rate; there were two disruptions in the last year.

The process of matching is supported by effective systems. Tracking meetings provide information about progress on work with children. A 'matching matrix' is used effectively to identify children's needs and link these with the skills and abilities of prospective adopters.

The manager and staff have appropriate Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks in place. Telephone verification of references is undertaken, but is not consistently recorded on personnel files.

There are safeguarding procedures in place but they do not make it clear that they relate to children placed for adoption and make no reference to historical abuse or those using adoption support services.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

There is evidence of sound and effective work in supporting adoptive families. There is a well-structured, clear process for those needing support to contact the adoption service. There has been an increase in the staffing levels for adoption support work since the last inspection and a direct telephone helpline has been established.

The files show comprehensive assessments take place and use is made of a wide range of resources. Adopters and staff spoke positively about access to the Centre for Health. One adopter wrote, 'we received tremendous support from [our social worker] and the team as a whole. I was referred to a specialist at Centre for Health'. Reference is made to the effective use of a morning each week provided by a clinical psychologist for consultation. The intention of managers is that the use of this post will expand into the development of a team focused on attachment work.

Through the work of the clinical psychologist, staff are able to gain access to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), in a timely way that allows for intervention when it is needed. Therapeutic work is undertaken with children on an individual basis. There are suitable rooms for this work in Norborough House and sessional workers are used to provide the work when it is needed.

There is a range of support provided by the adoption support workers with the adoption service. Three adoption support groups are run in different areas of Northamptonshire. An Adoptive Dad's groups is supported by the team. A well presented and informative newsletter is published, there is an annual Family Day and

a support group specifically for BME adopters. The adoption team have direct contact with schools and provide information and training for those involved in education.

Written protocols are in place to provide access to specialist advisers. Staff and adopters report effective access to the resources referred to above and to both the legal and medical advisers. The medical advisers meet with adopters to discuss issues of health relating to children who may be placed with them. Staff reported a strong commitment to adopters and children from the advisers they use.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

The service has a commitment to maintaining the birth heritage of adopted children. Children's social workers have a clear understanding of the life-long implications of adoption and of the significance for children of life story work and the creation of life story books. There is a variation in the time and resources readily available to staff in Northamptonshire. The area teams find it hard to have the time to undertake the work they believe is necessary. They identified the difficulty in prioritising many demanding aspects of their work and being 'pulled in different directions'. The social workers in the Permanence Team felt they had resources more easily available and a clear recognition of the importance of this work. Work is undertaken by the adoption team with student midwives, with the provision of half a days training on their course. It looks at the significance of holding and keeping very early information, which may have significance for an adopted child.

Arrangements are made for contact between birth families and their adopted children and for contact between siblings. The agreement about contact will generally be drawn up as a part of the support plan and letterbox contact, for indirect arrangements, commences at the earliest opportunity following placement. A member of the team will meet with birth parents and adopters to discuss the arrangements and to help with letter writing where needed. A social worker reads all letterbox exchanges and assesses their suitability in relation to content. All exchanges are copied. The contact is subject to review overtime to ensure the child's needs are being met. There is a reminder system when contact is due. Where birth parents lose contact, adopters are encouraged to continue with it, as long as it is in the child's best interests and all letters are kept on file in case the birth parent comes back at a later stage.

Northamptonshire County Council have an agreement with Adoptionplus to undertake independent support and counselling of birth families. Children's social workers are clear that they pass on leaflets with information about Adoptionplus to birth parents at various stages in the adoption process. The initiative to make contact is left with the birth parents rather than being started by Adoptionplus.

The service provides direct work for adults needing an intermediary service and birth records counselling. Those providing these services are appropriately trained. There is evidence of the work being undertaken with sensitivity and understanding.

Assessments are undertaken of the risk to all those involved if contact is being considered.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Work has been undertaken on the statement of purpose and it is a readable, useful document. However, it lacks information about the assessment of adoption support needs and does not have the current Ofsted address. Similarly work has been done on the children's guide, but it lacks the contact details for the Children's Right's Director and information about how children can access support. It is, however, child friendly and available in different formats to make it accessible to children of different ages and abilities. It is also available in different languages and formats if necessary.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. This is evidenced throughout this report with particular note made of the accessibility of information in different formats and in the consideration of adoptive applicants with varying health needs. The information available to prospective adopters is well presented and accessible. Adopters commented that they received the information quickly and that it is useful. Some adopters are not clear about their entitlement to various financial support, which could be helpfully added to this information pack. The information is clear about eligibility and about the needs of children waiting for adoptive families.

The manager of the adoption service is suitably qualified and has the knowledge, skills and experience to lead the service effectively. Staff commented that they valued the knowledge and expertise of the manager. They felt supported and valued in the work they do. The roles and responsibilities of managers are clear and communication is generally effective. Staff commented that 'all the managers are very approachable'. Another worker said, 'All the managers in the building are totally supportive of what we do. They're really good'. Systems are in place to support good practice, an example of this is the 'Tracking Meeting' to prevent drift and allow the early awareness of children who may need adoptive placements. The Adoption Board and Adoption Support Forum are effective mechanisms for developing practice and good communication. The systems are supported by effective and well integrated administrative support, which is valued by the staff.

Adopters are very positive about the work of their individual workers. One adopter commented 'Our social worker was super efficient, always met deadlines, explained everything thoroughly, clearly. She had lots of knowledge/expertise. She quickly made us feel at ease and we regard her as very professional and good at her job –

we couldn't fault her or the approval process'. Others commented on workers being 'professional, reliable and approachable'. Staff themselves valued working in the adoption team, one said, 'I love working in this team. I've never worked in a more supportive team'. The adoption team also have a strong and positive working relationship with the children's teams. The system of an identified worker to act as a link with the children's teams works well in most cases.

Staff have access to suitable training, with a wide range of 'in-house' courses available. External courses are accessible, although there is recognition of the budget restraints on attending these. Staff commented that managers value research and have a commitment to sharing current information. Supervision is available to all staff on a regular basis. It is planned, recorded and useful. Managers are also accessible for consultation whenever there is an urgent need.

The process for keeping councillors informed and up-to-date with developments in the service works well. There are regular reports to the different organisational forums and a six monthly report to executive on the adoption service. Northamptonshire is seen as a fair employer, although staff commented on the sense of being in constant reorganisation. The majority of staff have worked for Northamptonshire for many years. Some staff commented favourably on the council's flexible approach to the changing work patterns to meet individual needs.

Records for adopters are of a reasonable standard. The shortfalls have been referred to earlier in the recording of references. Files for children with an adoption plan are monitored at the time of being archived and no examples of these are included in this inspection. The archive is well managed. Information is suitably stored and is accessible.

Personnel records are compliant apart from the inconsistent recording of telephone verification of references. The panel members' files however, are not compliant. They lack consistent evidence of qualifications, references, telephone verification and in one instance the date of birth.

The adoption service is based at Norborough House, which is clearly identified, accessible and suitable for the operation of the service. Work is underway on the disaster recovery plan but it is not yet complete.

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 the checks undertaken on prospective adopters are consistently recorded and if appropriate, reference is made to guns, weapons, ceremonial knives and hanging cords in the health and safety check (National Minimum Standard 4)
 - ensure consideration is given to strengthening the role of the panel adviser (National Minimum Standard 11)
 - ensure there is an annual joint training day with adoption panel members and the agency's adoption staff (National Minimum Standard 11.4)
 - ensure the child protection policies and procedures include all points in Regulation 9 and Standard 32 (National Minimum Standard 32)
 - ensure that effective systems and resources are in place that allow social workers to obtain clear and appropriate information for the child about their birth family (National Minimum Standard 8)
 - ensure consideration is given to allowing contact to be initiated by the agency providing independent support to birth parents rather than leaving this to the birth parents themselves (National Minimum Standard 9)
 - ensure up-to-date, comprehensive personnel files are maintained for each member of staff and member of the adoption panel (National Minimum Standard 28)
 - ensure that the statement of purpose includes information about the assessment of adoption support needs and the current Ofsted address and that the children's guide contains all the information required in Regulation 3 LAA Regs 2003 (National Minimum Standard 1)
 - ensure that the disaster recovery plan is finalised and that it includes both the provision of premises and safeguarding/back-up of records (National Minimum Standard 29).