

Lincolnshire County 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

Lincolnshire County Council's adoption service undertakes all the statutory duties of a Local Authority adoption agency which include the approval, matching and placement of children for whom adoption is the plan and the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adoptive families, including those who wish to adopt from overseas. It also provides adoption support services for children, adoptive families, birth relatives and adopted adults, including birth records counselling and intermediary services. The council has service level agreements with two Adoption Support Agencies (ASAs) to provide further support for adoptive families and independent support for birth relatives. It has been recently restructured to provide a countywide service although the social workers and managers are based at three separate locations within the county.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was a key, announced inspection.

The agency now has a more targeted approach to the recruitment of adopters which is based on the needs of Lincolnshire children and a wide range of innovative methods are used to improve the diverse range of available families. There are effective systems in place to ensure children are placed quickly with appropriate families, although the placement of relinquished babies has some delay. The arrangements for the preparation, assessment and approval of adopters are robust, supported by well-considered panel recommendations and prompt decision-making. Good safeguarding arrangements are in place, supported by strong staff recruitment practices, training, and policies and procedures.

Adoptive families are supported through a range of methods including direct work, support groups, social activities, training and liaison with other agencies.

Birth relatives are encouraged and enabled to contribute to the maintenance of their child's heritage and are supported in this through access to an independent service or by the children's social workers in the adoption team.

The agency is well-managed at all levels, both structurally and operationally, by qualified, experienced, skilled and knowledgeable personnel. Committed and enthusiastic staff are supported to undertake their roles and responsibilities through good access to training and regular supervision. Minor shortfalls in some aspects of documentation have been identified, none of which impact on the safety or security of children.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last, key inspection, 13 recommendations were made and these were followed up at an interim inspection in February 2007, which found that three which related to improvements in adopter assessments, more robust checks and references and post adoption support services still required some attention. A further recommendation in relation to panel member appraisals was made.

This key inspection has found that the outstanding recommendations have been addressed and there have been significant changes to the service. Of particular note is the development of post adoption support and services to birth parents and relatives.

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 child-focussed and promotes the needs, wishes, welfare and safety of children who have adoption as their permanence plan. It demonstrates a strong awareness of the needs of the children who require adoptive families and has effective systems in place to ensure good communication between children's social workers and those who family-find. Co-working and parallel planning are embedded in practice and workers demonstrate a clear understanding that this prevents delay for the child. Children's social workers work hard to ascertain the wishes and feelings of children, the family finding and matching systems are considered and informed, all of which facilitate the prompt placement of the majority of children with appropriate adoptive families. There is some delay in relation to placing relinquished babies for adoption.

There is a targeted approach to the recruitment of prospective adopters which has been enhanced by the addition of a post of marketing officer, who demonstrates a vibrancy and enthusiasm for the task. Imaginative and innovative methods are used to attract potential adopters from a diverse range of backgrounds, in order to meet the needs of the children of Lincolnshire. The website is regularly updated with (anonymous) details about the children who need adoptive families and this message is given clearly to all enquirers.

The agency has a comprehensive approach to the preparation, assessment and approval of adopters. Enquirers receive a prompt response to their initial enquiry, which includes written information and an initial visit. However, the evidence shows that many applicants wait a long time for their preparation training as there are only

two courses a year at present. The preparation training is very good and adopters gave extremely positive comments about it such as: 'it was a real eye-opener', 'it was well-organised', 'it was thought-provoking' and 'it answered lots of questions we'd been worried about'. They said that social workers were sensitive to their needs and the impact of potentially distressing information and the presentation was very professional.

Likewise, adopters' experience of the assessment is good. Social workers are said to be 'competent, highly skilled, professional and a credit to their profession'. The agency is robust in the range of checks and references which they carry out, and the health and safety questionnaire is comprehensive. The assessment reports vary in the level of analysis but all are of an acceptable standard.

The arrangements for ensuring that adopters are fully informed about the children under consideration for matching with them are strong, and take place through information-sharing meetings which are properly chaired and minuted, ensuring an informed and considered approach to matching is achieved. The current arrangements for obtaining the adopters' agreement to notify the agency in the event of the death of their adoptive child do not give clarity to this specific issue, however.

There are two adoption panels, one of which is constituted as an adoption and permanency panel, to prevent delay in the consideration of cases. They are properly constituted and their operation is governed by comprehensive policies and procedures. Applicants attend for their approval and adopters attend for the matching. Although a daunting experience, they feel they are well-prepared, made welcome and put at ease.

The panel members are well-prepared for the panel and have read their papers, ask appropriate questions and have a child-focussed approach. It is well-chaired and there are good systems for feedback, both from attendees to panel and from the agency in terms of how cases are progressing. The current arrangements for panel advice do not allow the adviser to fulfil the role as intended by the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, however, as time constraints do not allow for rigorous quality assurance of the panel papers, face-to-face appraisals of panel members or a full overview of the administration. The panel is well-organised and members receive paperwork in good time to enable them to give it proper consideration. However, the minutes seen do not show separate consideration of siblings and the reasons are amalgamated with the summary of the case, which gives a lack of clarity.

The agency decision is made in a timely way but the recording of the decision is not always clear and some of the wording in the letters of notification is inappropriate.

Safe and robust recruitment and selection procedures are used to recruit staff, all of whom are suitably qualified, experienced, knowledgeable and skilled. All staff have had recent safeguarding training with a specific adoption focus and safeguarding practice is underpinned by clear procedures which relate specifically to children who are placed for adoption and in receipt of adoption support services.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency has developed its support services since the last inspection. The re-organisation of the service and improved staffing levels in the adoption support team has given more focus to the support needs of adopters, both pre-placement, pre-order and post-order. Staff are very committed to supporting adoptive families and are in regular contact with them. Post approval training has been developed and approved adopters can now access courses on therapeutic parenting, attachment, education and other relevant topics. The training available is geared around meeting the needs of adopters so they can care more effectively for their children and embraces diversity issues.

Approved adopters have a year's membership of Adoption UK funded by the council, which is a useful form of support. In addition, Adoption UK provide support groups, activity and family days, information letters and a buddy scheme for all Lincolnshire adopters, which supplements the information and support provided by the council.

The adoption support team carry out comprehensive assessments of need in relation to post adoption support and these are discussed and agreed with adopters and subject to review. The team provide direct work, or signpost to other agencies as appropriate. Adopters comment that the support provided is effective.

The agency has access to both medical and legal advisers who are accessible, approachable and helpful. The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) is also responsive and adopters were appreciative of their input, saying it was 'excellent'.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The reorganisation of the adoption service provides a good structure for involving birth parents in their child's adoption plan and enabling them to contribute to and maintain their child's heritage. A social worker from the adoption team is allocated at an early stage to co-work with the social worker from the Family Assessment and Support Team (FAST), and the purpose of this is to engage the birth parent, obtain their wishes and feelings, enable them to contribute to the Child's Permanence Report (CPR) and provide information for the child about their background. The CPRs inspected show that birth parents see and contribute to the CPR and their views are recorded. Direct evidence from birth parents confirms that they are informed, involved and enabled to contribute photos, memorabilia and meet adoptive parents, with appropriate support. CPRs are of a reasonable standard but do not state the wishes and feelings of children, although these are known, and some chronologies contain some unnecessary information.

The agency has a service level agreement with an ASA to provide an independent service to birth parents. This is in the early stages and developments are planned. This provides birth parents with a choice of support.

Birth parents contribute to the maintenance of their child's heritage through the initial information sharing and on an on-going basis through the letterbox scheme. This is a robust system, offering advice and guidance, which has been developed over the last few years. Direct contacts are also facilitated. Children have life story books which are of a good and appropriate quality and likewise, later life letters are sensitively written.

The adoption support team work with adopted adults and birth relatives who wish to initiate contact once the adopted person is over 18 years of age. Work is allocated within reasonable timescales, can be prioritized and the evidence indicates that this service is provided in a sensitive manner, with thought given to the welfare of all parties and the complex nature and long term implications of adoption. They provide counselling, limited tracing, intermediary and reunion services.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency has a comprehensive Statement of Purpose which is underpinned by recently updated policies and procedures which give a clear purpose and structure to all aspects of the work. There are two children's guides to adoption which address the varying needs of younger and older children in terms of their content.

The information which is sent to enquirers is professional and clear, and adopters said it was informative. This can be accessed through the website or by telephone request.

There has been a significant reorganisation to the adoption service since the last inspection and the positive impact of the changes are beginning to take effect. Although some staff experienced the process of change as painful and difficult, all acknowledge that the service has improved as a result. Everyone understands their roles and responsibilities and there are clear lines of accountability and communication.

The agency is managed efficiently and effectively by people who have appropriate skills, qualifications, knowledge and commitment. Although staff are based in three locations, this is managed effectively and staff feel supported by their managers and part of one service. They work well together as a team and all see the benefits of

being able to link all aspects of the service under one manager. Having social workers who work with the children, assess adopters and work with families, birth relatives and adult adoptees as part of one team facilitates the learning and informs practice in all areas.

There are good systems in place for monitoring the work of the agency at all levels. The lead councillor is well-informed through regular meetings with senior officers, receiving regular written reports and through the work of the corporate parenting panel.

Staff are positive about working for Lincolnshire, despite the changes, which indicates that the change management process has been undertaken well. They said they felt supported, there was flexibility, family-friendly working arrangements and 'it is good to come to work'.

Staff have good access to training and professional development which is appropriate for their needs. This is assessed through monthly supervision and annual appraisals. There are regular team meetings and team days to aid communication, consistency and develop a sense of identity.

Case files are not universally well-structured and there was evidence of mis-filing. However, there is a system of file audit and decisions made in supervision are clearly recorded. The panel members' files are very well structured and personnel files are in reasonable order. The recording of telephone verification of references is not consistent however.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The agency is pro-active in seeking applications from a diverse range of people, appropriate account is given to meeting the varied and assessed needs of children in the matching and placement process, training includes diversity issues in all their forms and staff demonstrate an awareness of the importance of having an inclusive approach in all aspects of their work.

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 placement of relinquished babies takes place without undue delay (National Minimum Standard 2)
- consider providing more preparation courses to prevent applicants having an inappropriate delay to their approval process (National Minimum Standard 4)
- develop a clearer system to record the adopters' decision in relation to notifying the agency in the event of their child's death (National Minimum Standard 5)

- reconsider the arrangements for the provision of panel advice to ensure that the role can be properly implemented (National Minimum Standard 11)
- review the adoption panel minutes to ensure that each sibling has their own minute and that the reasons are separated from the case summary (National Minimum Standard 12)
- improve the content of CPRs so they reflect children's wishes and feelings and do not contain unnecessary or inappropriate information (National Minimum Standard 7)
- improve the recording of telephone verification of references (National Minimum Standard 28).